THE LAW LIBRARY
APR 3 1986
UNIV. OF VIRGINIA

The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Peggy Guggenheim as history *by Hilton Kramer,* 1

Dylan Thomas in his letters *by Bruce Bawer,* 8

Michel Foucault *by David Gress,* 19

Josef Albers: in the engine room of modern art *by Eric Gibson,* 34

New poems *by Jane Kenyon, Robert Pack, & John Frederick Nims,* 42

Music: The LaSalle Quartet, and Pierre Boulez *by Samuel Lipman,* 50;
Art: Winter notebook *by Jed Perl,* 57
Books: *Irving Howe* The American Newness: culture and politics in the age of Emerson *reviewed by James W. Tuttleton,* 68; *William Barrett* Death of the soul *reviewed by Roger Kimball,* 77; The Bayeux tapestry *reviewed by Creighton Gilbert,* 80; **Letters,** 85

Volume 4, Number 8 *April* 1986
$3.50

PN4206
.N4206
c.2
Folksofc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jeffrey Rubinoff
Sculptures 1983-85

Queen's Park, Toronto, Canada
May 22-June 12, 1986

Tofino #1 Cor-ten plate. Height 7'3"

Jeffrey Rubinoff Studio
Hornby Island, B.C., Canada V0R 1Z0
(604) 335-0668

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE LAW LIBRARY
APR 3 1986
UNIV. OF VIRGINIA

Joan Mitchell

New Paintings

April 3-May 10

Tony Smith

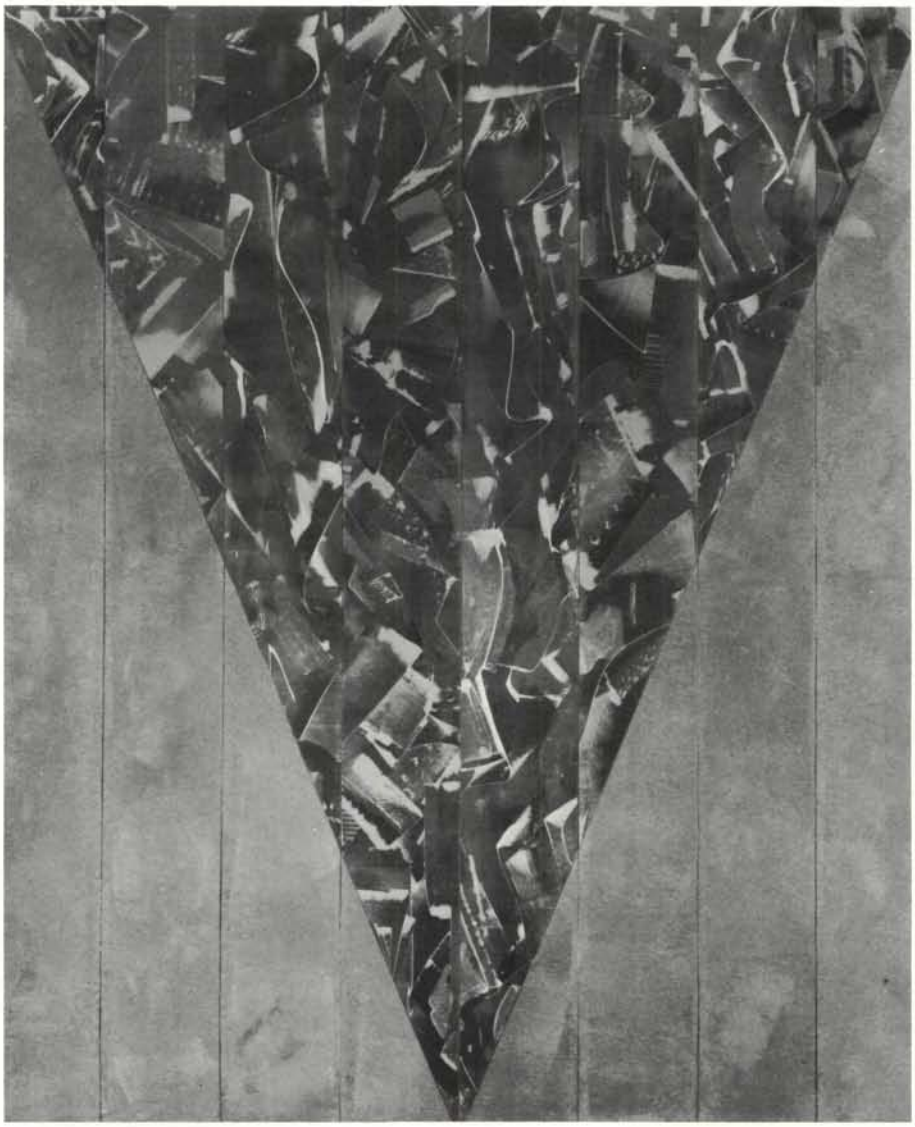
Paintings 1953-63, Small Sculpture 1961-69

May 17-June 21

XAVIER FOURCADE INC.

36 East 75th Street New York, New York 10021 212 535-3980

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Kites, 1985-6. Acrylic on canvas, 8′4″ × 6′9″ (253 × 206 cm.)

Kenneth Noland

New Paintings

April 3 to 26

André Emmerich Gallery

41 East 57th Street, New York 10022 · Telephone (212) 752-0124

A catalogue with seven color plates is available for $10 ppd.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *April 1986*

Editor *Hilton Kramer*

Publisher *Samuel Lipman*

Managing Editor *Erich Eichman*

Assistant Managing Editor *Eva Szent-Miklosy*

Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*

Office Manager *Elizabeth Vickery*

Contributors to this issue

Bruce Bawer wrote on Robert Stone's new novel, *Children of Light,* for the March issue of *The New Criterion.*

Eric Gibson reviews current exhibitions for *The New Criterion* and *Studio International.*

Creighton Gilbert's new book, *The Works of Girolamo Savoldo,* was published by Garland in March.

David Gress, whose essay "The Pride and Prejudice of Fernand Braudel" was published in the April 1983 issue of *The New Criterion,* is Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution.

Jane Kenyon's poems have appeared in *Poetry* and *The New Yorker.*

Roger Kimball wrote on the International PEN Congress for the March issue of *The New Criterion.*

Samuel Lipman is the music critic for *Commentary* and the author of *The House of Music* (Godine).

John Frederick Nims's *Selected Poems* was published in 1982 by the University of Chicago Press.

Robert Pack's most recent books include *Faces in a Single Tree,* a book of poems, and *Affirming Limits,* a book of essays. He teaches at Middlebury College.

Jed Perl wrote on William Hayter and Leon Golub for the March issue of *The New Criterion.*

James W. Tuttleton teaches American literature at New York University. He is the author of *The Novel of Manners in America.*

The New Criterion is published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. Publication Number ISSN 0734-0222. April 1986, Volume 4, Number 8. Subscription rates: $27 for one year, $50 for two. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019.

Copyright © 1986 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc.

Distributed in England by Periodicals in Particular, 1 Prince of Wales Passage, 117 Hampstead Road, London, NW1. Editorial/business correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt of an issue must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of its date.

Advertising representative: Kate Shanley, 521 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10175. (718) 729-6221.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman and printed by the Eastern Press of New Haven, Connecticut.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ROBERT MOTHERWELL

New Work

April 15 - May 8

M. Knoedler & Co.

19 East 70 Street. New York 10021. Telephone (212) 794-0550

RUSSELL MALTZ

APRIL 8-MAY 3

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Peggy Guggenheim as history

by Hilton Kramer

There is no figure in the history of twentieth-century art more difficult to keep in proper focus than the avid collector—the kind of collector, that is, who specializes in the acquisition of contemporary art. To this strange, hardy breed—more often ridiculed and maligned than admired or understood—we obviously owe much. Without collectors who take an interest in new art and who are willing to lavish significant sums of money on it, the entire life of art in our society would be a very different thing. It would be a much poorer thing, in my opinion, and not only in the strictly financial sense. It is upon such collectors, after all, that artists and their dealers largely depend for their living; and it is to dealers' exhibitions, let us remember, and to the donations and bequests which collectors make to the museums, that the rest of us owe a large portion of what is important to us in our aesthetic experience. We are all, in a way, the beneficiaries of the collecting enterprise—a fact of cultural life which, except on ceremonial occasions, is seldom accorded the acknowledgement it deserves.

Why, then, is it more or less to be expected that these same collectors will be regarded with considerable suspicion and resentment in their lifetime? There are many good reasons, alas. For one thing, in a buyers' market—which, despite all the changes that have overtaken the art world, is still the kind of market which the majority of living artists are obliged to deal with—it is not uncommon for collectors to drive very hard bargains. What is worse, collectors often boast about them, too, even while claiming the role of generous and disinterested patron. For another, there are the collectors who clearly invest in contemporary art largely in the hope of making a financial killing at some later date. (The activities of the auction houses in recent years have provided abundant evidence of this practice, and the auction houses represent only the tip of the iceberg in this matter.) Then, too, there are the collectors who are guided less by their aesthetic interests than by their social ambitions, their sexual proclivities, their political affinities, or their fixation on some other extra-artistic obsession. Collectors—even the most enlightened and adventurous among them—tend to be arbitrary in their decisions, fickle in their tastes, and impure in their motives. Their interests are subject to sudden shifts which are seldom purely aesthetic in origin. And it doesn't add to their appeal that, once their collecting activities are accorded a certain degree of public attention, their egotism is often found to rival and even surpass that of the artists themselves. The grounds for suspicion are indeed not wanting.

Collectors with sufficient money and drive constitute a power, moreover, and power of the particular kind which they are in a position to wield inevitably induces feelings of powerlessness—and thus of resentment, envy, and even outright hatred—among

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

those who are excluded from its immediate benefactions. Around almost every significant collection of contemporary art there sooner or later accumulates a sizable accretion of bruised feelings, failed hopes, and broken promises waiting to be avenged. Like every manifestation of power, that of the collector is therefore a natural object of paranoia, and there is never any shortage of people, both inside the art world and out side it, who are given to nursing their grievances (real or imagined) and plotting their revenge.

On the other hand, it is not unusual for the collectors who are the targets of all this free-floating paranoia and revenge to come to believe that it is they who have been ruthlessly exploited. They aren't always wrong, either. Human nature being what it is, gratitude tends to be of short-term duration in a rising art market. For all of these reasons, we shall harbor fewer misconceptions about collectors and the role they play in the history of their time if we recognize straightaway that they are not in any sense to be construed as angels.

Some collectors, of course, are in less danger of being misunderstood in this respect than others. Consider the late Peggy Guggenheim, who is now the subject of two very different books. One is a biography by Jacqueline Bograd Weld which leaves no sensational anecdote, no matter how distasteful or repugnant, unrecounted.[1] The other is a vast, scholarly catalogue by Angelica Zander Rudenstine which, while rigorously ignoring the personal affairs of the collector, concentrates with an almost superhuman objectivity on documenting the collection of works of art which Peggy Guggenheim acquired during a particularly crucial period of our history.[2] Peggy Guggenheim was, of course, a notorious character in her day. (She died in 1979 at the age of eighty-one.) Her collection is now preserved as a museum in Venice, Italy, where she lived during the last three decades of her life. Taken together, these two books neatly encompass the twin aspects of her career—the scandalous and the serious—neither of which can be ignored in any attempt to understand the place she once occupied in American cultural life.

In her own lifetime Peggy Guggenheim was praised for her sagacity and courage in recognizing important new talent—most especially, of course, Jackson Pollock's—while at the same time she was reviled for her stinginess, her pettiness, and her utter lack of anything that could be described as personal morals. That as a collector and a dealer she played a significant role in the formation of the New York School is now universally acknowledged, and her distinction in this regard is in no way diminished by the fact that she availed herself of some excellent advice—what important collector hasn't?—or that she drove some very hard bargains with the artists she benefited. That she was also, for much of her life, a selfish wretch who left a trail of broken lives wherever her power over others was complete is not to be denied, either. In many respects she was the very archetype of the heiress as a mad egomaniac, using what money she had—in Peggy Guggenheim's case, it turns out never to have been a huge fortune—to gratify her wayward appetites and impose them on others. In Jacqueline Bograd Weld's biography we are spared very little in the way of sordid detail about these matters. Yet whatever our judgments may be on Peggy Guggenheim as a woman—and they are bound to be pretty harsh, I think—she was nonetheless one of those people who made a difference in the life of art. What that difference was and how she came to play the role in the life of art that she did is, from our present historical perspective, quite the most interesting thing about her. After all, the world has never lacked for nymphomaniac heiresses or monster egomaniacs of either sex wreaking havoc on those around

1 *Peggy: The Wayward Guggenheim* by Jacqueline Bograd Weld. Dutton; 493 pages, $24.95.

2 *Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice* by Angelica Zander Rudenstine. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., & The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation; 843 pages, $85 (after June 1, $95).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

them; but the art collector represented in Mrs. Rudenstine's 842-page catalogue remains a rarity even today when, it sometimes seems, every collector of contemporary art seeks to emulate one or another aspect of the Peggy Guggenheim role.

Interestingly, her career as a collector, dealer, and patron was of far shorter duration than the size and fame of her collection might lead one to suppose. Its major phase lasted about ten years, from 1938 to 1948. After that she continued to add works to the collection—Bacon, Boccioni, and González in the Fifties, for example, and Dubuffet and Kupka in the Sixties, and slews of Italians during the entire term of her residence in Venice—but, with some notable exceptions, these were not the kind of acquisitions which added real luster to her holdings. Sequestered in Venice in these later years, she was no longer in touch with the most vital artistic currents, and she had begun in any case to think of herself as an historical personage—which in itself is probably fatal as far as taking a continuing interest in new art is concerned. For all practical purposes, then, Peggy Guggenheim's role as a power in the art world was pretty much limited to a single decade. But what a decade it was!

What also has to be borne in mind is that as an American she belonged to the generation which expatriated itself to Europe in the period between the two world wars. She had gone to Paris in the Twenties, and had quickly become part of the American expatriate community of artists and writers there. If not for the Second World War, it is unlikely that she would have ever returned to the United States to live. The bohemian milieux she frequented in Paris and London clearly suited her, and so did the distance they provided from the oppressive family atmosphere in New York which she had fled as soon as she was able to do so. When she did return to New York in the summer of 1941, she was in some respects as much a foreigner—at least in regard to its art scene—as any of the artist-émigrés whose arrival so decisively altered that scene.

In Paris in the Twenties she had met, among others, Marcel Duchamp, Brancusi, Kay Boyle, Jean Cocteau, Malcolm Cowley, Nancy Cunard, Janet Flanner, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Man Ray, Tristan Tzara, and Virgil Thomson.[3] This was her entrée into the world of the international avant-garde, and it stood her in good stead when, years later, she set up as a serious dealer and collector. She opened her first gallery, called Guggenheim Jeune, in January, 1938—not in New York, however, but in London—with Duchamp as her principal advisor. Its inaugural exhibition was devoted to the work of Jean Cocteau—which was not, perhaps, a happy augury. But the gallery's second exhibition was, for it brought to London the first show ever to be devoted to the paintings of Kandinsky in the British capital. Because nothing in the show was sold, Peggy Guggenheim felt obliged to buy one of the pictures herself, and it was this purchase which marked the beginning of her career as a collector.

Guggenheim Jeune proved to be a short-lived enterprise—it opened on January 24, 1938, and closed on June 22, 1939—but not because of any diminution of interest on the founder's part. On the contrary, she had quickly decided that a gallery was not sufficient for her ambitions. What she now wanted to establish in London was nothing less than a Museum of Modern Art. Inspired by the existence of the Museum of Modern Art in New York—which had been founded ten years earlier and was just then moving into its first permanent quarters at 11 West Fifty-third Street—she set about this daunt-

3 It was in the Twenties, long before she thought of buying paintings, that Peggy Guggenheim began her career as a patron. It was then that she gave Berenice Abbott, who was working as Man Ray's assistant, the money which enabled her to set up as a photographer on her own. Money was also given to Jane Heap for the *Little Review*. And it was in the Twenties that Peggy Guggenheim began providing the writer Djuna Barnes with a regular monthly check—a practice which was continued for the remainder of both their lives.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing task with that combination of demonic energy, shrewd calculation, and madcap insouciance which was to carry her through some very odd adventures in the years ahead. She persuaded Herbert Read to quit his job as editor of *The Burlington Magazine* so that he could serve as the director of the new museum, signing him to a five-year contract, and she arranged to rent the London residence of Kenneth Clark for both her own and the museum's use. The inaugural event was to be a loan exhibition of modern masterworks starting with Cubism and abstraction and ending with Surrealism and other contemporary works. Read was asked to draw up an appropriate list of artists to be represented in this show, and when, owing to the imminence of the war, the project had to be abandoned, she paid Read half the money due him on his five-year contract and set off for the Continent to acquire the proposed list for her own collection.[4] She assumed that sooner or later she would have a museum somewhere.

Was she slightly mad or was she merely an innocent as far as the true political and military situation in Europe that summer was concerned? Probably both, I suspect. About politics Peggy Guggenheim appeared to know nothing and care nothing. What is certain is that, in this matter as in others dear to her heart, she was determined to have her own way—and amazingly, despite Hitler and the expected invasion, she did. Her whirlwind adventures in France, which she did not leave until the summer of 1941, certainly add up to one of the most extraordinary stories of the time. Her goal, or so she claimed, was to buy a work of art every day, and she pretty much did—going to galleries and to the artists' studios, and seeking out collectors who were eager to sell. And as soon as the word got around, there were plenty of people seeking her out. All in all, she spent about forty thousand dollars, and came away with a staggering hoard of superior works by Brancusi, Giacometti, Léger, Miró, Ernst, Dali, and sundry other members of the School of Paris. Not everyone was charmed by the spectacle, of course. As Jacqueline Weld writes:

> One painter . . . from whom Peggy got nothing "but rude remarks" was Pablo Picasso. When Peggy arrived at his studio with her shopping list, hoping to buy one of his most recent pictures, the painter arrogantly ignored her, pointedly talking instead to some other guests. Then, ambling over to Peggy, he said contemptuously, "Lingerie is on the next floor."

All the same, she managed sooner or later to acquire some very fine Picassos, too, though not from him, and for the most part she did very well indeed.

Was she taking advantage of the artists in a difficult situation? Sensitive to the charge, she afterwards claimed that "I didn't know anything about the prices of things. I just paid what people told me." But this was not the whole story, of course. She had, after all, been a dealer—even if she hadn't sold much. She certainly pressed her advantage where Max Ernst was concerned, acquiring an important cache of pictures for relatively little money. On the other hand, the sale undoubtedly saved his life, enabling him to escape arrest by the Nazis. If the prices she paid for things now strike us as absurdly low, they were not all that different from the prices which such works of art fetched in the peacetime market in the Thirties. It was inevitable that Peggy Guggenheim's wholesale assault on the French avant-garde art market at that dire historical moment would be resented, yet the whole story is rather wonderful, all the same, and I see no evidence that she caused anyone any injury in the process. She

4 About this list Mrs. Rudenstine writes: "The list itself has not, thus far, been located—either among the papers of Herbert Read or among those of Peggy Guggenheim, who believed that the list was lost during World War II. By the 1970s she was unable to recall a single specific work that had been on the list, and it has not been possible to reconstruct it. Indeed, it is not even clear whether the list enumerated individual works or merely artists' names, although the latter seems more likely."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

even outsmarted the French authorities by getting her whole collection shipped to America as "household goods" only months before the United States entered the war. The entire episode is like something out of a Henry James novel reinvented by Evelyn Waugh. Unfortunately, Jacqueline Weld isn't really equal to either the high drama or the real comedy of this bizarre episode, but the essentials of the story are nonetheless recounted in a straightforward manner, and it remains a riveting one in any telling.

Within six months after her return to New York, Peggy Guggenheim was planning the new gallery which proved to be her most celebrated accomplishment. Called Art of This Century and designed by Frederick Kiesler in a highly eccentric style, it quickly established itself as the principal center for the international avant-garde in New York. It was also the place where the New York School made its debut.

Again, she had excellent advice. As Mrs. Weld writes, "Peggy credited men like Alfred Barr and James Johnson Sweeney as her primary influences during those whirlwind days of the 1940s." Duchamp was also on hand, of course. And by all accounts a now forgotten figure named Howard Putzel, who had already been of help to her in Paris and now came to work at Art of This Century as secretary, advisor, and general factotum, played a major role. He was a real connoisseur of the new art. It was Putzel who recommended Frederick Kiesler to Peggy Guggenheim, and it was he who persuaded her to show Mark Rothko and Hans Hofmann—two painters whose work she really didn't much care for. Not that she always followed his advice—she refused to give Adolph Gottlieb a one-man show, for example. Opinion appears to be unanimous about her treatment of Putzel: it was wretched. She picked his brain, relied on his judgment, paid him a pittance, made impossible demands on his time and attention, and in general drove him crazy. In the end he left her, of course. He got someone to back a gallery of his own, and it too was distinguished—but it survived for only a season, and he died soon after, probably a suicide. By and large, those who were completely dependent on Peggy Guggenheim did not come to a happy end.

In any event, within three years of opening Art of This Century, the gallery was solidly launched as the flagship of the new American avant-garde.

> Many of Howard Putzel's protégés [Mrs. Weld writes] exhibited in the autumn salon at Art of This Century, opening the 1945 season on October 6: William Baziotes, Julian Beck (who went on to fame as founder of the Living Theater), Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Jim Davis, John Ferren, David Hare, Lee Hersch, Peter Busa, Robert de Niro (the father of the actor), Jerome Kamrowski, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Richard Pousette-Dart, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still . . . .

Writing to Herbert Read at the time, she singled out Pollock as "the best of all these new young people," and added that he "may sometime be as well known as Miró." She had then been acquainted with Pollock's work for little more than two years.

Mrs. Weld tells an interesting story about Peggy Guggenheim's first encounter with a Pollock painting, and—who knows?—it may even be true. If it is, it would give us a clue—though not, I think, *the* clue—to whatever perspicacity she brought to her artistic judgments. In the spring of 1943, Art of This Century organized a "Spring Salon for Young Artists," and one of the jurors was Piet Mondrian.

> As Peggy and Mondrian waited for the other jury members to arrive, Peggy began to set out the works around the gallery. She noticed Mondrian looking at a picture in the corner—one submitted by Pollock. "Pretty awful, isn't it?" she asked. "That's not painting, is it?" Mondrian made no reply, but stood staring. Peggy continued, "There is absolutely no discipline at all. This young man has serious problems . . . and painting is one of them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> I don't think he's going to be included . . . and that is embarrassing because Putzel and Matta think very highly of him."
>
> When he finally spoke, Mondrian told Peggy that it was the most exciting painting he had seen—in Europe or New York—in a very long time. "You must watch this man." Peggy was stunned. But, she said, "You can't be serious. You can't compare this and the way you paint." "So, don't compare this," he replied.

Jimmy Ernst, who claimed to have witnessed this scene, said of Peggy Guggenheim: "She was willing to listen, she was willing to be told, she was willing to see . . . . You know, there was nothing phony about it. And it *was* shocking to see those paintings." Duchamp also served on the jury for that "Spring Salon," and he disapproved of Pollock. Clearly some instinct told her that Mondrian was right and Duchamp was wrong. So Peggy Guggenheim came around, and soon put Pollock under contract—a rare thing for an American artist at the time, and virtually unheard of for an artist of Pollock's generation. To be sure, she was characteristically stingy about it, and paid him too a pittance in return for quite a few pictures. But she launched him, all the same.

How are we to account for it? It simply won't do to claim that she was merely following good advice. The advice, after all, was conflicting, and there was no shortage of artists under recommendation from one or another advisor. Also, it is clear that Peggy Guggenheim didn't particularly like Pollock as a man, and she liked his wife, Lee Krasner, even less. (The feeling was mutual, to say the least.) So there was no question of a sentimental attachment. Unlikely as it seems from everything else we know about Peggy Guggenheim, I think we must conclude that her decision to back Pollock was based on a disinterested artistic judgment. But even to say this does not quite explain it, either. The only persuasive observation I have ever heard on this subject is one which Mrs. Weld quotes from Clement Greenberg. "Her taste . . . was often erratic and unsure," Mr. Greenberg remarked. "But she had a flair for life, a sort of smell for life that made her recognize vitality and conviction in a picture. It was surer ground in selecting the new than taste." It is, I think, the principal flaw of Mrs. Weld's biography that in a book running to almost five hundred pages she really adds little or nothing to this observation. On the entire question of Peggy Guggenheim's real relation to the art of her time—the art she exhibited, promoted, and sometimes acquired for herself—Mrs. Weld provides no answers. The subject remains as much an enigma on the last page of *Peggy* as it is on the first.

Compounding the enigma is the fact that when we turn to Mrs. Rudenstine's catalogue we find that with the exception of the Pollocks there is really very little of the art of the New York School represented in the Peggy Guggenheim collection. The collection, which contains a great many first-rate works of the European avant-garde, is pretty skimpy on American art. Besides Pollock, only Alexander Calder and Joseph Cornell are represented in any serious way—and Calder and Cornell are closer to the Europeans in spirit than any of the painters of the New York School. For Peggy Guggenheim, clearly, her brief adventure on the New York scene was an enforced furlough, and she quit that scene to return to Europe as soon as it was possible for her to do so. I doubt whether she was then fully aware of what she had accomplished in New York. Later, of course, as the fame of Pollock and other members of the New York School prospered and the prices of their paintings began to skyrocket, she began to feel a little bitter—she felt she had been cheated by the Pollocks and even brought a legal action. Yet in the end her fundamental judgment on the New York School is to be found in the collection. Except for Pollock, she obviously regarded most of it as inferior to her beloved European masters. As a dealer, she is rightly considered a champion of the American avant-garde. When she closed Art of This Century in 1947, Mr. Greenberg wrote in *The Nation*:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> [Peggy Guggenheim's] departure is in my opinion a serious loss to living American art. The erratic gaiety with which Miss Guggenheim promoted "non-realistic" art may have misled some people, as perhaps her autobiography did too, but the fact remains that in the three or four years of her career as a New York gallery director she gave first showings to more serious new artists than anyone else in the country . . . . I am convinced that Peggy Guggenheim's place in the history of American art will grow larger as time passes and as the artists she encouraged mature.

And he was absolutely right, of course. But as a collector Peggy Guggenheim was actually much closer to the other well-healed American collectors of her generation in preferring the work of the Europeans. About this curious paradox, too, Mrs. Weld has little or nothing to tell us. Indeed, one wonders whether she is fully aware that there is a paradox to be pondered in this matter.

In Mrs. Rudenstine's mammoth catalogue, on the other hand, no issue or fact or document pertaining to the collection is allowed to go unexamined. Not only is every work of art meticuously scrutinized, but Peggy Guggenheim's entire career as a dealer and a collector is painstakingly documented. Every exhibition and its catalogue is described; many of the most important reviews are excerpted; and in general we are given a vivid and detailed archive of a sort rarely attempted in the field of twentieth-century art. *The Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice* is a work of exemplary scholarship and intelligence. With its attention so firmly focused on works of art and their history, moreover, this fine catalogue recalls us to what is finally the real basis of our interest in Peggy Guggenheim—not the scandals and sexual escapades and broken lives, but the art in which she seemed to find an identity that eluded her in every other realm of experience. Is it this, perhaps, that offers us a clue to the mystery of the avid collector?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dylan Thomas: the poet in his letters

by Bruce Bawer

The first thing that may occur to one, upon learning of the imminent appearance of a nearly thousand-page edition of the complete available letters of Dylan Thomas, is that there is hardly an aching need for such a compilation. Who, after all, in this world full of good books that most of us will never get around to reading, is really clamoring for an exhaustive account of the life and times of this archetypal postwar "celebrity" poet? Hasn't the story of his bibulous Anglo-American misadventures already become too stale and ubiquitous a legend? Isn't it about time that his verse stopped taking a back seat to his turbulent personality? Shouldn't we be beginning, at last, to attempt to make a sensible judgment as to the real value of his contribution to poetry in our time?

Well, yes. But to commence reading *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas* is, nonetheless, to become hopelessly hooked.[1] From the outset, the reader of this impressive volume—whose editor, Paul Ferris, has written the finest extant biography, *Dylan Thomas* (1977)—is in the intimate company of a fascinating human being, unmistakably the Dylan Thomas of legend, but at the same time a man far more mesmerizing, exasperating, amusing, and touching than the buffoonish, bigger-than-life media-darling we have all come to think we know. The Dylan Thomas of these letters is vulgar, guileful, manic, terminally immature, eternally obsessed with sex, death, words, and himself, and contemptuous of English professors, women, other poets, and other Welshmen; to indulge in a bit of Dylanesque alliteration, he's hyperbolic, high-strung, hierophantic, borderline hysterical. In the book's third letter, written to his friend Trevor Hughes at age seventeen, he confesses: "I can't concentrate. My mind leaps from thought to thought like a wombat . . . . I've got a head like a windmill." And throughout the book it continues to spin, spin, spin almost without let-up. So vivid and colorful a portrait does this assemblage give of Thomas in action, in fact, that it reads at times nearly like an exuberant epistolary novel by some twentieth-century Samuel Richardson—a novel that is wonderfully absorbing, full of humor and pathos, rich in revealing detail, dramatic reversals, and (ultimately) tragic irony.

Thomas was born in Swansea, Wales, in 1914, the son of David John Thomas, a schoolmaster (whom the poet revered), and Florence Thomas (whom he despised). D. J. Thomas, as a young man, had wanted to write, and, though the couple had a daughter, Nancy, eight years older than Dylan, "it was on his son," writes Ferris in a prefatory note, "that D. J. lavished the attention of a disappointed man." Dylan was brought up on poetry and began to write it at a very early age; indeed, the very first letter in

1 *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas,* edited by Paul Ferris; Macmillan; 1024 pages, $39.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Collected Letters, written to Nancy in his childhood, contains a few brief childish verses, presumably of his composition. Interestingly, these routine pieces of doggerel reflect some of the quintessential characteristics of Thomas's mature poetry: the preoccupation with death, the infatuation with the sea, the tendency to indulge in wordplay.

From the very beginning, then, the principal subject of these letters is poetry and literary creation. The subject never ceased to enthrall him. Nowhere in his correspondence, though, is he more elaborately revealing, and more amusingly and outrageously dogmatic, about his ideas on this subject than he is in his earliest letters—specifically, the ones he wrote, in 1932 and 1933, to Trevor Hughes, and, in 1933 and 1934, to Pamela Hansford Johnson, both of whom were ambitious young writers like himself. In one letter, for instance, the eighteen-year-old Thomas advises the twenty-nine-year-old Hughes, who he feels is in danger of becoming a commercial writer of stories about "pasteboard characters," to

> Write, write, write, out of your guts, out of the sweat on your forehead and the blood in your veins. Do not think about Mr Potter's guide to the salesmanship of short stories produced, apparently, on the lines of the Ford works. Do not bother your head about the length of the stuff you are writing . . . . Write a story (if you must write stories) about yourself searching for your soul amid the horrors of corruption and disease, about your passionate strivings after something you don't know and can't express. (This is one of the few ways [of] knowing it and expressing it.)

He tells Hughes to "delve deep, deep into yourself until you find your soul, and until you know yourself . . . . [U]ntil you reach that little red hot core, you are not alive. The number of dead men who walk, breathe, and talk is amazing . . . . Into the sea of yourself like a young dog, and bring out a pearl." (This last image, incidentally, may explain Thomas's title *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* better than anything else.) "There is only one object: the removing of veils from your soul & scabs from your body."

Clearly, by the age of eighteen Thomas was already certain of the type of poet he was. The writers he holds up to his friends as examples are for the most part visionary mystics and *symbolistes* like Poe, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rilke, Yeats, Francis Thompson, and Gérard de Nerval; Thomas describes himself as following "in the path of Blake, but so far behind him that only the wings on his heels are in sight." He seems to identify strongly with D. H. Lawrence, with whose *oeuvre* he has something of a love-hate relationship; but he despises Walt Whitman (whom he would later come to admire), Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Virginia Woolf, and such late Victorians as Arnold, Kipling, and Ernest Dowson. Above all he despises the English Romantics, especially Wordsworth, whom he characterizes as "a human nannygoat with a pantheistic obsession," a "tea-time bore, the great Frost of literature, the verbose, the humourless, the platitudinary reporter of Nature in her dullest moods . . . . He writes about mysticism but he is not a mystic; he describes what mystics have been known to feel, but he himself doesn't feel anything, not even a pain in the neck. He could well have written his Ode in the form of a treatise: 'Mysticism and its Relations to the Juvenile Mind.'"

The foregoing excerpt, as it happens, is part of a page-long anti-Wordsworthian tirade in one of Thomas's letters to Pamela Hansford Johnson. These letters—which number about thirty—are, all in all, the meatiest, most enthralling ones in the book. Johnson, obviously, was the perfect foil for Thomas—a "tea-time" poetess, more or less, refined, mannerly, and tamely romantic (though capable of writing poems that reminded Thomas of Christina Rossetti, "the best Pre-Raphaelite of the whole bunch")—and she came along at the perfect time, when Thomas was beginning to publish poems and was hungry for someone to show them to and discuss them with. Just two years older

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than Thomas, she initiated their long-distance friendship when she wrote to congratulate him on a poem he'd had in the *Sunday Referee,* a newspaper to which she too contributed. (She would later abandon poetry and become a well-known writer of fiction and the wife of C. P. Snow.) Johnson's side of the correspondence does not appear here, of course, but one never feels the need for it; Thomas's long, fervid responses to her letters, and his blistering critiques of the poems she sent him, tell us much of what we need to know about her—and a great deal of what we need to know about him. In his first extant letter to her, the nineteen-year-old Thomas comes across as a precociously sophisticated literary critic, a self-consciously outrageous propagandist for "the cosmic significance of the human anatomy," and an irredeemably crude and cocksure enemy of "arty" poetry, sentimental poetry, and poetry that seeks to record "the chaos of to-day." ("So much new verse," he writes her, "can be summarised into, 'Well, there's been a hell of a war; it's left us in a mess; what the hell are we going to do about it?'") He complains that a poem she has sent him contains "[t]oo many adjectives, too much sugar. And the fifth and sixth lines are pure cliché. 'I write from the heart,' said a character in some novel I've forgotten. 'You write,' was the reply, 'from the bowels as after a strong emetic.' Not that I apply that rude remark to 'Prothalamium'; I'm quoting not because of it but for the sake of it." (As her diary reveals, Johnson found this letter—which was actually the second she had received from him—"Charming & very, very modern, not to say rude.")

In his letters to Johnson, as in those to Hughes, Thomas speaks up continually for his own sort of poetry, the poetry of the "guts," which apparently, at its gutsiest, offended Johnson's delicate sensibilities. "What you call ugly in my poetry," Thomas argues, "is, in reality, nothing but the strong stressing of the physical." Why, he asks, should some aspects of the physical be regarded as more offensive than others? "Only by association is the refuse of the body more to be abhorred than the body itself . . . . it was chance that decided [Adam and Eve] to hide their genital organs, and not, say, their armpits or throats." "I fail," his *apologia* continues,

> to see how the emphasising of the body can, in any way, be regarded as hideous. The body, its appearance, death, and diseases, is a fact, sure as the fact of a tree. It has its roots in the same earth as the tree. The greatest description I know of our own "earthiness" is to be found in John Donne's Devotions, where he describes man as earth of the earth, his body earth, his hair a wild shrub growing out of the land. All thoughts and actions emanate from the body. Therefore the description of a thought or action—however abstruse it may be—can be beaten home by bringing it onto a physical level. Every idea, intuitive or intellectual, can be imaged and translated in terms of the body, its flesh, skin, blood, sinews, veins, glands, organs, cells, or senses.

If, he says, his physicality seems too obsessive, that's because there's no middle ground. The young writer "must class himself under one of two headings: under the philosophy (for want of a better word) which declares the body to be all and the intellect nothing, and which would limit the desires of life, the perceptions and the creation of life, within the walls of the flesh; or under the philosophy which, declaring the intellect and the reason and the intelligence to be *all,* denies the warmth of the blood and the body's promise." He is honest enough to admit that his partiality toward the "poetry of the flesh" may have something to do with his own physical exiguity. "It is typical of the physically weak to emphasise the strength of life (Nietzsche); of the apprehensive and complex-ridden to emphasise its naiveté and dark wholesomeness (D. H. Lawrence); of the naked-nerved and blood-timid to emphasise its brutality and horror (Me!)." Indeed, it becomes increasingly obvious in these letters to Johnson that beneath the arrogant sensuality hides a highly insecure young man. Even

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in that first extant letter to her he fibs, compulsively it seems, about his age and publication credits; in later letters he habitually makes ironic references to the less-than-heroic dimensions of his own body (he was about five foot six), calling himself "a short, ambiguous person" and saying that "the more despondent I become the littler and weaker I feel." He is insecure not only about his height but about his background, which he puts down constantly. He speaks of Swansea as "the worst of provincial towns" and of "little colliers, diseased in mind and body as only the Welsh can be." "It's impossible to tell you," he writes, "how much I want to get out of it all, out of its narrowness and dirtiness, out of the eternal ugliness of the Welsh people, and all that belongs to them, out of the pettiness of a mother I don't care for and the giggling batch of relatives." He shares his innermost torments with Johnson, apprising her of his fears, his frustrations, his humiliation in a local bar by a group of young toughs; he informs her (a schizoid fiction based on his neurotic mother's contention that he had "weak lungs") that he is dying of tuberculosis, and has only a few years left; in a hysterical, partly unpunctuated letter, he "confesses" a liaison (probably invented) with a young lady of the neighborhood; he tells Johnson that she is his "only friend"; and he interpolates the following lines in an otherwise seemingly normal (for him) letter:

Very Serious Question?
Am I mad?

Was he? Ferris, in his absorbing introduction, is equivocal, describing Thomas's extremist persona as utterly manufactured, the manifestation of "a conscious determination to be taken for a poet," while acknowledging that this conscious determination may have been "underpinned by a deeper response to demons that pursued him in adolescence and thereafter." But with Thomas, as with Hamlet, the question of whether he "put an antic disposition on" or was truly disturbed seems, in the end, to be immaterial: for to put an antic disposition on is, after all, in itself the act of a disordered mind. One might say that like Hamlet (as described by J. Dover Wilson), Thomas "assume[d] madness because he [could not] help it." Or, to put it somewhat differently: being unable to shake off his mental instability, he did all he could to make it interesting—to be mad, as it were, with a theatrical flair. (It is perhaps worth noting, in this connection, Thomas's participation in Swansea's Little Theater during his teenage years.) That at times he was patently putting on an act by no means mitigates the genuineness and profundity of his desperate emotional infirmity.

Certainly it cannot be denied that Thomas's obsession with poetry was authentic. And along with that uncontrived and unchangeable obsession went an equally obsessive awareness of mortality; if he was mad, perhaps it was essentially in this obsessive awareness that his madness resided. Virtually all of his poems are founded upon an intense consciousness of the nexus between sex and birth and death—a recognition that to have intercourse is to make possible the conception of a baby, and that to be born, in turn, is to begin to die. The centrality of this nexus is more explicit in some poems than others; take, for instance, the uncharacteristically direct poem, "Written for a Personal Epitaph":

Feeding the worm
Who do I blame
Because laid down
At last by time,
Here under the earth with girl and thief,
Who do I blame?
Mother I blame
Whose loving crime
Moulded my form
Within her womb,
Who gave me life and then the grave,
Mother I blame.
Here is her labour's end,
Dead limb and mind,
All love and sweat

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gone now to rot.
I am man's reply to every question,
His aim and destination.

Man's "aim and destination" are, indeed, Thomas's theme in one poem after another. "Their Faces Shone Under Some Radiance," for example, presents a couple making love in a cemetery, surrounded by graves and illuminated by the moon's radiance, both of them unaware that "radiance came and passed"—that time and nubility, in other words, are transient. In "We Who Are Young Are Old," a voice cries,

"We who are young are old. It is the oldest cry.
Age sours before youth's tasted in the mouth
And any sweetness that it has
Is sucked away."

The most beautiful of Thomas's poems, "Fern Hill," likewise concerns itself with the fact that even the youngest (their youth symbolized, as in all of Thomas's poetry, by the color green) are in some sense time's laughingstocks:

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that
time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the
shadow of my hand,
In the moon that is always rising,
Nor that riding to sleep
I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the
childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of
his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

It is, of course, because of his preoccupation with the inevitable connection between birth and death that Thomas frequently brings together wombs and tombs, cauls and shrouds, describing a womb, for instance (in "The Woman Speaks"), as spitting forth "a baby's corpse," and depicting his own birth (in "Twenty-four Years") as follows:

In the groin of the natural doorway I crouched
like a tailor
Sewing a shroud for a journey
By the light of the meat-eating sun.

In a number of poems, however—among them some of his best—he attempts to interpret the way of all flesh so as to emerge from his contemplations with a sense of victory. This is the case with "And Death Shall Have No Dominion":

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the
clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall
rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

The poem derives its sense of consolation (or its illusion thereof) from a recognition of (or insistence upon) the unity of all life. One is reminded of Hardy's poem "Transformations," in which buried corpses "are not underground,/But as nerves and veins abound/In the growths of upper air." Thomas's poem "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" takes a similar perspective: "After the first death," it concludes, "there is no other." Mortality, in short, is a horror we all share; there are no new tragedies under the sun.

One of the things that distinguishes Thomas's poetry is that, though it deals with such morbid matters, it is generally exuberant in tone—though perhaps *manic* would be a more accurate term. The poems' images are chiefly of the human body and of other natural phenomena; the four elements, earth, air, fire, and water, are ubiquitous. Thomas habitually creates mixed natural images—"the whinnying light," "your grave in my breast," "a desolate boy who . . . sheds dry leaves"—the aim of which is to suggest nature's interconnectedness (and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which has often caused him to be described as a Surrealist). His frequent half rhymes and internal rhymes serve the same purpose, as does his recurrent use of synesthesia (exemplified by such titles as "The Colour of Saying" and "When All My Five and Country Senses See"). In his concentration upon natural and physical imagery, more than in any other respect, Thomas was, it should be recognized, carrying out a rebellion against the most celebrated English poets of his youth, the Oxford poets—W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice—whose most fashionable poems excluded human beings and the natural world almost entirely in their relentless piling up of "modern" images: pistons, pylons, submarines, and the like. Sex, in particular, was rarely mentioned explicitly in their poems.

By contrast, sex is omnipresent not only in Thomas's poems but—unsurprisingly—throughout *The Collected Letters.* The poet's ideas about the subject were far from conventional. "From the first months of puberty," he writes Johnson (who, after they met in February of 1934, became his girlfriend for a brief period), "girls & boys should be allowed to know their bodies . . . . their sexual expression should be encouraged." This apparent openmindedness, however, does not seem to have extended to homosexuality. In one of many curious references to homosexuals, he writes:

> Have you remarked upon the terrible young men of this generation, the willing-buttocked, celluloid-trousered, degenerates who are gradually taking the place of the bright young things of even five years ago? Or is the degeneracy, the almost unbelievable effeminacy, the product of the Welsh slums alone?

He proceeds to describe, in considerable detail, a young man he observed at a hotel the night before, "the most perfect example I've ever seen, the sort of thing one hears of in coarse stories but rarely encounters in the flesh . . . . It's the only vice, I think, that revolts me and makes me misanthropic." In another letter to Johnson he facetiously suggests that she is "turning male," unfortunately for him, because "I'm sure I don't like little boys in That Way." Images of buggery occur often in his letters, as they do in many of his poems and stories (the village of "Llareggub" in *Under Milk Wood,* for example, is "bugger all" spelled backward). The abundance and hostility of such references cannot but make one think, after a while, that he doth protest too much. And sure enough, it develops that after Thomas moved to London in November of 1934 (an event that helped end his friendship with Johnson, who soon learned that Thomas was harder to take in person than by mail), he had brief affairs with a couple of young men, to one of whom he wrote three surprising pseudo-love letters, each more nauseatingly coy than the next.

His ability to shift gears sexually seems to have carried over to politics as well. During his Swansea years he was capable of turning out fanatical-sounding left-wing harangues about "mass production," "economic despotism," "the composition of the classes," and "the death of the West." A couple of these jargon-packed tirades are addressed to the editor of the *Swansea and West Wales Guardian,* and two or three—including the following passage—appear in letters to Johnson:

> The hope of Revolution, even though all of us will not admit it, is uppermost in all our minds. If there were not that revolutionary spark within us, that faith in a new faith, and that belief in our power to squash the chaos surrounding us like a belt of weeds, we would turn on the tap water and drown ourselves in its gases.
>
> *Everything* is wrong that forbids the freedom of the individual. The governments are wrong, because they are the committees of prohibitors; the presses are wrong, because they feed us what they desire to feed us, and not what we desire to eat; the churches are wrong, because they standardize our gods, because they label our morals, because . . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And so on. Ferris informs us that these spurts of political zealotry were the result of Thomas's association with A. E. ("Bert") Trick, a passionately left-wing Swansea grocer whose parlor was the local center of literary and political discussion. Considering the heat of Thomas's rhetoric in such letters, it is remarkable that virtually none of his poems—most of which were written in the politically preoccupied 1930s—is even slightly political. For all his youthful left-wing zealotry, he had a strong antipathy for literature that sought to make statements about the "class struggle." "I shall never, I hope," he wrote Trick from London, after meeting some of the leading young Communist intellectuals of the day, "be mixed up in any political ramifications of literary, or pseudo literary London; honest writing does *not* mix with it; you can't be true to party *and* poetry; one must suffer, and, historically, poetry is the social and economic creed that endures." Clearly, his devotion to poetry ran far deeper than his devotion to any political idea.

Indeed, Thomas's interest in left-wing politics faded rapidly once he found himself, in London, part of a rather more interesting literary crowd than the one that met in Trick's salon. Beginning at this point, Thomas's correspondence consists primarily of businesslike dispatches to agents and editors and chummy notes to literary figures like Geoffrey Grigson, Rayner Heppenstall, Frederic Prokosch, Edith Sitwell, T. S. Eliot, Vernon Watkins, and Julian Symons, several of whom became his friends and supporters. Thomas was on his way. His first book, *Eighteen Poems,* published in 1934 by the relatively small-time *Sunday Referee,* was succeeded in 1936 by *Twenty-five Poems,* published by the distinguished London firm of J. M. Dent. Meanwhile, his poems and stories were appearing in major literary periodicals; he was beginning to be recognized as a young writer of conspicuous gifts. He also, alas, was beginning to acquire a reputation as a slothful, heavy-drinking panhandler. Unable to support himself by writing, he had early fallen into the habit of soliciting money from relatives, friends, and admirers. The "begging letters" to his friends are generally amiably blunt. "Are you rich temporarily?" he asks Vernon Watkins in 1936. "Would you like to lend me some money, a pound or, at the very most, two pounds?" (Watkins came through generously, and would continue to do so over the years.) A year later, aware that his sister and her husband disapprove of his plans to marry an Irish girl named Caitlin Macnamara, he hits them up for a wedding gift: "As a gesture, Christian, gentlemanly, ladylike, sisterly, in-law-brotherly, friendly, & (in face of your obvious distrust of what could be, & has, by father, been called 'this lunatic course of action') congratulatorily from a married couple of some years' standing to two younger persons about to embark on the voyage of legal matrimony, would you like to slip me a couple of quid?"

Perhaps the most interesting begging letters are the shamelessly sycophantic ones, many of them sent to such estimable literary acquaintances as T. S. Eliot and some of them addressed to complete strangers like the literary patrons Sir Edward Marsh and Lord Howard de Walden. Invariably, Thomas depicts himself in these letters as a stoically suffering young man on the brink of financial ruin who has consecrated his life to his art and who simply wants to feed himself and his family (he and Caitlin had three children in all, the first of whom was born in 1939) and to pursue his sacred vocation. In 1938, for instance, when James Laughlin of New Directions wrote with an offer to become Thomas's American publisher, Thomas responded with an appeal for funds:

> I must say, straight away, that I *must* have some money, and have it immediately. I live entirely by my writing; it can be printed only in a small number of advanced periodicals, and they pay next to nothing, usually nothing. I was married recently—against all sense, but with all happiness, which is obviously more sensible—and we are completely penniless. I do not mean that we just live poorly; I mean that we go without food, without proper

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> clothes, have shelter on charity, and very very soon will not have even that shelter. I have now less than a shilling; there is no more to come; we have nothing to sell, nothing to fall back upon. If I can be tided over for a little time, I think I will be able to work hard enough to produce poems and stories that will provide some kind of food and shelter. If not, there is no hope at all . . . . Can you, at once, give me money for which, in return, I promise you all the work I have done and will do?

Thomas was, it would seem, eternally on the lookout for a wealthy mark. Shortly after moving in 1938 to the Welsh coastal town of Laugharne (where he and Caitlin would make their home, off and on, for the rest of their peripatetic life), Thomas wrote John Davenport that "Thirty bloody pounds would settle everything. If you know any rich chap fond of a jingle, who knows his Peters & Quennells, do let me know at once. Otherwise it'll be traipsing again, no stability at all, no hope, and certainly no work. Try to think of some sap, some saint." When Davenport informed him that Alec Waugh, though supporting Thomas's application for a grant, had recommended that he "write more stories and fewer letters," Thomas was irked. "When I want advice from Alec Waugh," he replied sarcastically, "I'll go to his brother." Those who took pity on Thomas often lived to regret it. Lorna Wilmott, one of many people who lent the poet a house or apartment, returned to her London flat in April of 1940 to discover that he had pawned a fur coat, a typewriter, a gramophone, some cutlery, and the family silver. In an "attempt to cover his tracks," as Ferris puts it, Thomas sent Wilmott a deliberately misdated letter indicating that he had left the apartment months earlier.

As the years went by, Thomas's income rose. His books did well, especially those published by Laughlin in the United States: *The World I Breathe* (1939), *New Poems* (1943), *Selected Writings* (1946), *In Country Sleep* (1952), and *Collected Poems* (1953). Beginning in 1941, he earned a good deal of money by writing film, radio, and television scripts, and his reading tours of America in the early 1950s yielded impressive sums. But neither he nor Caitlin (whose improvidence appears to have equaled his own) was able to hold onto money for very long. Much of it, apparently, went to buy drinks, not only for Dylan and Caitlin but for friends and for strangers they met in pubs. The poet and his wife were, in this respect, a sort of Welsh version of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, a pair of childish, self-destructive romantic egoists. A famous manifestation of Thomas's Fitzgeraldian irresponsibility was his gift for missing appointments; several of his letters contain apologies for broken dates, complete with dubious explanations for his failure to appear. In 1934, for example, he writes Trevor Hughes to explain that he had shown up at the Fitzroy on Wednesday, only to discover, upon returning home, that "*Tuesday was the night.*" In 1944, having missed Vernon Watkins's wedding—at which he was supposed to have served as best man—he proffers an elaborate and extremely fishy story involving a missed train, a wartime priority phone call, and an inability to recall the name of the church. Perhaps the most honest explanation of this sort is the one that he gives Eric Walter White. Whenever he comes into London, Thomas writes, "bang go my plans in a horrid alcoholic explosion that scatters all my good intentions like bits of limbs and clothes over the doorsteps and into the saloon bars of the tawdriest pubs in London."

So self-centered was Thomas that when war broke out with Germany, his only thought (to judge by his letters) was to keep it from interrupting the progress of his literary career and, if possible, to benefit from it financially. On the first of September, 1939, he writes to his editor to ask, "This bloody war won't stop Dent's monthly allowance, will it?" Ten days later, he confides to Glyn Jones: "I want to get something out of the war, & put very little in (certainly not my one & only body)." Never for a moment, it seems, did the twenty-five-year-old poet consider joining the service.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Later in September he writes Desmond Hawkins for advice on obtaining conscientious-objector status, insisting: "I'm Mr. Humanity and can't kill or be killed (with my approval)." His dormant Leftism seems, opportunely enough, to have resurfaced: "What have we got to fight for or against? To prevent Fascism coming here? It's come. To stop shit by throwing it? To protect our incomes, bank balances, property, national reputations? I feel sick. All this flogged hate again." In a letter to Trick (wherein, incidentally, he deploys one of his buggery images), he declares: "I don't know how you feel about all this, but I can't raise up any feeling about this war at all and the demon Hitlerism can go up its own bottom: I refuse to help it with a bayonet." Though he seems, to a degree, to remain Trick's disciple ("*Write soon* and tell me about the War: I've only my feelings to guide me"), he is determined, in his awesomely egocentric way, not to allow his precious time and energy to be wasted on a war against people "with whom I have no quarrel": "There's a need now for some life to go on, strenuously & patiently, outside the dictated hates & pettinesses of War, & that life I, for my own part, shall continue to support by my writing and thinking & by living as coolly, hotly, & as well as I know how." In April of 1940 he writes Laughlin that "the Germans are not my enemies, I do not want to die or kill, freedom's only a word and I'm a thinking body." In 1941 he is still singing the same tune. "What a lot of trouble it would have saved," he tells Vernon Watkins, "if We had sunk the Hood and They the Bismarck."

As the Forties wore on, Thomas's Muse seems to have begun to fizzle out. Gradually, he stopped writing poetry. In 1933, his most productive year, he had turned out forty-four poems; in 1934 the number had fallen to fifteen, and thereafter, through 1945, the per-year average hovered at around six. In 1947, 1949, and 1950, he wrote one poem per year; in 1946, 1948, 1952, and 1953 he wrote no poems at all. Some of his late verses, of course, were among his greatest: "Poem in October" was composed in 1947, "A Refusal to Mourn," "Fern Hill," and "In My Craft or Sullen Art" in 1945, "Lament," "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," and "Poem on His Birthday" in 1951; the sole 1947 poem was "In Country Sleep," the sole 1949 poem "Over Sir John's Hill," the sole 1950 poem "In the White Giant's Thigh." Even as his productivity declined, then, the poems themselves grew in clarity and strength. It was during the late Forties and early Fifties, too, that Thomas wrote his play *Under Milk Wood*.

But these last years were, on the whole, the darkest of his life. Thomas was confused, despondent, convinced that his poetic powers were failing, desperate for some place or somebody to escape to. And in May of 1949 the opportunity came. John Malcolm Brinnin, the new director of the Poetry Center at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York, invited Thomas to read at the Center, and offered to line up other readings in the United States. Thomas, to whom America was less a real country than a symbol of wealth and of withdrawal from cruel reality, had been hoping for years to receive such an invitation. In 1945 he had tried to arrange an American trip, writing to Laughlin: "I should like to come over to the States after the war for a few months. Any chance of getting a job to keep me while over there? Reading, talking?" Later that year he had corresponded with the American anthologist Oscar Williams: "I'd love a little ladleful from the gravy pots over there . . . . How could I earn a living? I can read aloud, through sonorous asthma, with pomp; I can lecture on The Trend of Y, or X at the Crossroads, or Z: Whither? with an assurance whose shiftiness can be seen only from the front row . . . ." But the plans had come to nothing. Now he answered Brinnin's letter eagerly, and his subsequent letters to Brinnin, and to others, are full of enthusiasm for the journey.

But when he got to America, the enthusiasm seems almost to have given way to hysteria, to a terminal case of sensual overload. From a midtown hotel room in New York, Thomas writes to Caitlin about

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> the *noise* all day & night: without some drug, I couldn't sleep at all. The hugest, heaviest lorries, police-cars, firebrigades, ambulances, all with their banshee sirens wailing & screaming, seem never to stop; Manhattan is built on rock, a lot of demolition work is going on to take up yet another super Skyscraper, & so there is almost continuous dynamite blasting. Aeroplanes just skin the tips of the great glimmering skyscrapers, some beautiful, some hellish. And I have no idea what on earth I am doing here in the very loud, mad middle of the last mad Empire on earth . . . .

Though he speaks admiringly of many American people and places, and refers to San Francisco as "the best city on earth," a place of sunlight and hills and ocean, words like *hell* and *mad* and *nightmare* recur throughout the hyperkinetic letters he sent Caitlin. From Washington, for instance, he writes that the room he's in is

> hell on earth. Oh why, why, *didn't* we arrange it *somehow* that we came out together to this devastating, insane, demonaically [*sic*] loud, roaring continent . . . . Oh, Cat, my beautiful, my love, what am I doing here? I am no globe-trotter, no cosmopolitan, I have no desire to hurl across the American nightmare like one of their damned motorcars. I want to live quietly, with you & Colum, & noisily with Aeronwy, & I want to see Llewelyn, & I want to sit in my hut and write, & I want to eat your stews, and I want to touch your breasts and cunt, and I want every night to lie, in love & peace, close, close, close, close, close, to you, closer than the marrow of your soul. I LOVE YOU.

But he could no more live quietly than he could fly. Thomas was a born addict, and America was to him the ultimate vicious intoxicant that he could neither resist nor take in moderation. And most intoxicating of all was New York, which he described, in a letter to his parents, as "this titanic dream world, soaring Babylon . . . ."

The reading tour was, of course, wildly successful. Virtually overnight, Dylan Thomas became famous—as much for his drunken carousing as for his spellbinding recitations. Much in demand, he returned to America for extensive reading tours in 1952 and twice in 1953, during which time he made many American friends, was a habitué of the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village, and had affairs with a number of American women. But as his fame grew by leaps and bounds, his ego collapsed with equal rapidity. Writing to Charles Fry, a London editor, about the 1952 trip, he explained that as a result of endlessly "ranting poems to enthusiastic audiences," he

> gradually . . . began to feel nervous about the job in front of me, the job of writing, making things in words, by myself, again. The more I used words, the more frightened I became of using them in my own work once more. Endless booming of poems didn't sour or stale words for me, but made me more conscious of my obsessive interest in them and my horror that I would never again be innocent enough to touch and use them. I came home fearful and jangled. There was my hut on a cliff, full of pencil and paper, things to stare at, room to breathe and feel and think. But I couldn't write a word. I tried then to write a poem, dreading it beforehand, a few obscure lines every dumb day, and the printed result shook and battered me in any faith in myself and workman's pride left to me. I couldn't write a word after that. These are the most words I have written for a year.

And so it went. In the fall of 1953, Thomas was in New York on his fourth American visit. On October 29, he made his last public appearance, at City College. During the next few days he drank heavily and took Benzedrine at the White Horse Tavern, wept in his Chelsea Hotel room in the company of his mistress Elizabeth Reitell, and spoke to John Malcolm Brinnin about suicide. On November 5, he was given a morphine injection "to relieve the symptoms caused by alcohol" and slipped into a coma; on November 9, he died at St. Vincent's Hospital. The death was an accident—its

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

official cause was alcoholism and pneumonia —but then Thomas had, all his "naked-nerved and blood-timid" life, been an accident waiting to happen.

As the whole world knows, death was kinder to Thomas than life had been. His boisterous personality, at the podium and in the barroom, and the mysterious and controversial manner of his demise combined to make him, after his passing, far more of a hot item than he had been for most of his life. Before long, his books (which had sold well enough, during his lifetime, for poetry books, but had hardly made him rich) were selling like romance novels. Like Sylvia Plath, he had become a posthumous cult hero, his personal tragedy ironically translated into an absurd romantic legend, his coarse egocentrism worshipped by armies of impressionable young people who thought that they were honoring the spirit of poetry. If *The Collected Letters* establishes anything, though, it is that Dylan Thomas the man was, to say the least, most unsuitable hero material. He was vain, unreliable, self-centered, obnoxious, a man who used people in every way possible. He wasted too much of his time sitting at bars and trying to impress people who were not worth trying to impress. Yet it is a mistake to dismiss his poetry on this account, to write him off as a fluke, a flake, a celebrity poet who owes his fame solely to an outrageous manner and an untimely death. Certainly what is important, in the end, is not the way he lived but the poetry he wrote; and the fact is that more than a few of his poems are undeniably, unequivocally magnificent. Whether his misbegotten legend endures or not, Dylan Thomas is a poet of exquisite gifts whose finest work most assuredly deserves to survive. And *The Collected Letters,* by virtue of the unprecedented view that it offers of the inner life from which those often obscure poems sprang, can only help make them more accessible.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Michel Foucault

by David Gress

Michel Foucault, the French thinker, historian, and epistemologist, died in 1984 at the age of fifty-seven. In recent years his reputation has grown rapidly in American academic life. Professor Frederick Crews of the University of California, writing in *The American Scholar,* speaks of "an exodus from the camp of Marx to that of the late Michel Foucault, who is also the clear favorite of a new academic generation that cares little for the tortuous history of Marxist apologetics." Crews adds:

> It is a nice question . . . whether Foucauldian analysis arose in order to thwart Marxism or, rather, to save its debunking spirit from its doomed propositional content. Foucault himself, significantly, began as a Marxist and a student of Althusser's; they were both Party members in the dreary Lysenko period . . . . [T]he ever-shifting, self-ironic, and brilliantly original style of analysis that Foucault eventually developed can also be regarded in part as a solipsistic Nietzschean travesty of Marxism . . . . In Foucault, perhaps, we are looking at the Marxist to end all Marxists.

As regards the way Foucault has been received in the American academy, especially certain departments of English, history, and art, Crews is on the mark. Nevertheless, the use of Foucault in support of a Marxist stance is a dubious enterprise. One of the major impulses behind Foucault's work was a rejection of the political "games of truth" which he knew firsthand in France in the Fifties, when Party ideology dictated what Communist academics were supposed to study and how. Foucault derived from this experience, and from the use of terror in the name of social health in the Soviet Union, the idea that definitions of sanity, health, and normality were not universal but dependent on changing power relations. He added to it the view of Friedrich Nietzsche that modern rationalism itself was no more reliable a guide to truth than premodern forms of thought. This Nietzschean position—which is neutral toward modern rationalism in all its forms, including Marxism—is incompatible with the attitude of bourgeois academic Marxists, who certainly believe that their own stance of opposition to the Western political system is based on superior insight. Read selectively, Foucault can indeed be used to rescue Western Marxism from decay. Read properly, and with an understanding of motive and context, his ideas and propositions are no more appropriate to that purpose than those of Nietzsche himself.

Foucault's outer life appears to have been quite uneventful. He was born 1926 in Poitiers in central France, the son of a doctor. He studied the history and philosophy of science in Paris in the 1950s under Gaston Bachelard and Louis Althusser, whose writings inspired the structuralist version of Marxist determinism that swept Paris in the 1960s. Foucault's dissertation was published

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in 1954 under the title *Mental Illness and Psychology,* inaugurating the first of the three major phases of his published work, that of the investigation of health, illness, and madness, and the borders and definitions among them, in the early modern period, primarily the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This phase, referred to by some commentators as Foucault's "archaeological" phase, continued at least through the publication of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), in which Foucault investigated the foundations of the modern social and behavioral sciences. In 1960, he left Paris, unwillingly one suspects, to take up his first permanent post at the University of Clermont-Ferrand, where he remained until 1968, when he returned to Paris, first to the new campus of the University of Paris at Vincennes (1968-70), then to the Collège de France, where he became professor of "the history of systems of thought." The appointment to the Collège was an extraordinary honor for a man as relatively young as Foucault still was at the time. (He was forty-four.) He could with confidence have looked forward to over a quarter century of independent research and teaching. The great advantage of the Collège over ordinary institutions of higher learning is that the faculty design their own courses in complete freedom. They are not required to repeat courses, nor is there any basic curriculum. By common consent the professors at the Collège represent the very elite of France's academic and intellectual life.

About the time of his appointment, Foucault began publishing the works of his second phase or area of interest, namely the "genealogy" and triumph of what he called "bio-power," the practices by which we, the inhabitants of modernity, survey and control each other. Foucault regarded this type of power as peculiar to the modern world, which is characterized by a belief in technology and the methods of natural science and by the irresistible spread of democratic and egalitarian ideas. A crucial aspect of modernity for both Nietzsche and Foucault was the rise of humanitarianism, that is, the belief that the purpose of society and the state is the improvement of life, both material and psychological.

In *The Genealogy of Morals,* Nietzsche traced this humanitarianism to its roots in bourgeois notions of propriety, guilt, public morality, and common sense. Since Nietzsche's style and method broke with the common standards of philosophical and historical argument, it is often overlooked that his critique of humanitarianism was not entirely original, but formed a crucial part of the cultural criticism of leading Western social thinkers such as Tocqueville, Burckhardt, and Max Weber. Foucault was profoundly influenced by Nietzsche's aphoristic, elliptical, yet assertive style; he believed that the resulting opacity and obscurity of argument was a necessary part of Nietzsche's message rather than an obstacle to understanding. Foucault's own main work of this phase was *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Here he sought the origins of modern "bio-power" in the physical drills and corporal training of eighteenth-century armies, which were regarded as miniature images of social organization, and in the universal surveillance of the modern prison. For Foucault, the modern prison—based on the idea of rehabilitation through punishment—was the prime example of humanitarianism as coercive power. Before the eighteenth century, he pointed out, imprisonment was highly unusual; the standard types of punishment for criminal behavior were fines, flogging, banishment, or execution.

The period around 1970 was politically dramatic in France as elsewhere, and despite an often stated distaste for politics, Foucault found himself unavoidably involved in debates and discussions on the events of the day. In the 1970s, Foucault gave interviews rejecting the Communism of his youth and the persistence of radical utopianism; these statements led many to categorize him as a neoconservative. While it is true that he hailed the "new philosophers"—a loose grouping of former radicals who had rejected Marxism in the late Seventies—this label fits Foucault as badly as any other. Those of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his writings that do have a topical concern are frequently as ambiguous in their recommendations as his academic work was unclear in its implications.

Fixed conclusions were nevertheless drawn from Foucault's writings, especially by the academic Left in America, where Foucault enjoyed his greatest and most uncritical popularity in the Seventies and after. This was ironic, since his dissection of humanitarianism and of Marxist truth-claims ought logically to have prevented it. The explanation is that his admirers on the American academic Left chose what they wanted from Foucault according to their own agenda, while ignoring the context and deeper intent of his arguments. The reason they could do this was, as Frederick Crews noted, that Foucault's wildly generalizing style lent itself to selective use. After absorbing a few chapters of one or the other of Foucault's books, it is fatally easy to generate Foucauldian critiques of any institution, practice, or attitude one happens not to like. Conversely, Foucault's rejection of the standard canons of scholarship means that one cannot object to selective readings in the name of such canons without risking the accusation that one is simply incapable of understanding how to read and use his work.

Even though much of the use made of Foucault in America has arguably been in violation of his own purposes, it must be admitted that his general "debunking spirit," to use Crews's phrase, is well suited to the leftist temperament. Foucault constantly claimed to be unmasking, in a manner unattainable by normal methods, the coercive character of social institutions ordinarily considered to have generally benevolent purposes, like hospitals, armies, or prisons. This posture was directly borrowed from Nietzsche, who frequently used the metaphor of the mask as the true picture of a reality that is never what it seems and always conceals more than it reveals. In Nietzsche, and even to some extent in Foucault, the act of unmasking is directed with complete objectivity against all social idols, those of the Left as much as those of the Right. Foucault's American followers, however, have happily appropriated the posture of unmasking while discarding the cool objectivity that is its necessary complement. In a recent book on Foucault and Marxism, for example, Mark Poster, a historian at the University of California, Irvine, defines Marxism not as an economic theory but as "a critical view of domination which as historical materialism takes all social practices as transitory and all intellectual formations as indissociably connected with power and social relations." He can then argue, with evident satisfaction and relief, that "Foucault is continuing the work of the Western Marxists by other means."[1]

Thus Foucault's debunking posture easily lends itself to political exploitation by American Leftists, for whom capitalist freedom is a hoax and America, especially under Reagan, is a morally inferior regime that threatens the rest of the world with oppression and war. Foucault was at bottom a kind of anarchist; he did not want to distinguish between degrees of coercion. His institutional critiques left little room for the assertion of any real difference between various types of institutions—say, between a Nazi or Soviet concentration camp on the one hand and a Western prison on the other. Likewise, his debunking of humanitarianism as coercion hardly allowed for judging the relative merits of liberal democratic procedures and the significance of legal rights

1 The title of Poster's book is *Foucault, Marxism and History: Mode of Production versus Mode of Information*; Polity Press (Cambridge, England), 174 pages. As the title suggests, Poster argues that Foucault is doing for our modern society—where the control of knowledge and information is said to be as important as the control of material resources—what Marx did for the nineteenth century. In other words, Foucault is saving what Sidney Hook called "existential Marxism" from collapse. Poster's claim of superior insight into "domination," however, is itself an assertion of power—the irresponsible will to power of the tenured intellectual over the society that, by ignoring or resisting his analysis, supposedly demonstrates its moral inadequacy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as against the arbitrary actions of despotic regimes. This refusal to acknowledge any real distinction between the intentions and the uses of power in different political systems made his arsenal of arguments very attractive to those of his American academic admirers who were less interested in the history of knowledge and power than in undermining the moral legitimacy of the democratic system.

The third phase of Foucault's work became public in 1976 when he published the first volume of his *History of Sexuality.* In this book he argued against the modern idea that Western sexuality had undergone a repression in the nineteenth century from which it was only now emerging. Instead, he saw sexuality in general, both before, during, and after the Victorian era, as part of a continuous Western view of the self and its proper development and care. In volumes two, three, and four of the *History* he returned to classical Antiquity in order to uncover the origins of this Western idea of the self, particularly as it was expressed in ideas about sex.[2]

This enterprise was ended by his unexpected death in Paris in May 1984. Foucault had been spending the winter before at Berkeley, the last of his many visits to American campuses. He had been chronically ill; and on his return to Paris he went into hospital, where certain discoveries were made. According to James Harkness, the translator of some of his works, it is "almost certain that the so-called 'disease of the nervous system' that killed him was made possible by the breakdown of his immune system as a result of having contracted AIDS."[3] Foucault was indeed a homosexual, but for most of his life he had been of the old-fashioned kind who do not regard it as the essence of their being and hence do not need to flaunt it at every turn, insisting that others recognize its superiority. His attitude changed somewhat during the era of his American success, perhaps because homosexuality on American campuses had by then become almost inevitably blatant and political. At New York University, for example, where Foucault taught in the early Eighties, he did not resist being publicly associated with homosexual activism.

Foucault was concerned with definitions of truth, self, and power, and with the uses made of these factors of human existence at various times, especially during the period that marked the breakdown of the classical *episteme* and the construction of modernity. The notion of *episteme* recurs often in Foucault's writings. The original Greek meaning of the word is "knowledge" or "understanding." Foucault used it to mean a combination of world view, form of knowledge, and the entire body of methods and outlooks used to apprehend and analyze phenomena. Thus, he referred to the "classical *episteme,*" by which he meant the ideas, sensibilities, and philosophical orientations of Western Europe that prevailed until the late eighteenth century, and to the "modern *episteme,*" which arose in the revolutionary era of 1770-1800. The modern *episteme* included the extension of power from overt coercion and discipline to the hidden coercion of modern institutions and practices; in fact, Foucault argued that this new use of power was the defining characteristic of modernity. The beginnings of the classical *episteme* were uncertain. In the *History of Sexuality* Foucault appeared to be arguing that its origins were to be sought in classical antiquity.

Foucault's concerns were posed as such by the philosophy that above all others defined the terms of modernity, that of Hegel. Foucault inherited his concerns from those who challenged the consequences of Hegel's system, notably from Nietzsche, but also from the French tradition of Hegelianism, a tradition that, through the work and personality

2 The second volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* has just been published in English translation by Pantheon, under the title *The Use of Pleasure*; 293 pages, $17.95. The first volume, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I, An Introduction,* was published by Pantheon in 1981.

3 *The American Spectator,* December 1985, page 39.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of Alexandre Kojève, was intimately connected with French Communism. In the Thirties, Kojève gave a widely influential series of lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit,* attended by Sartre among others, the gist of which was that Hegel had reconciled freedom and necessity and that free human action was no longer possible because history had come to an end. This end of history was said to be concretely exemplified in Stalin's Russia, which therefore represented the inevitable fate toward which all modern industrial societies must move. After the war, Kojève, as a senior civil servant, devoted his career to the development of the European Economic Community, without finding this to be in conflict with his earlier determinism. Since he is also supposed to have believed that the superior man is never obliged to reveal his true opinions on anything, it remains uncertain whether his Stalinism was a mask or a genuine conviction. However that may be, it was as an apologist for Soviet totalitarianism that Kojève influenced a generation of French Communist and fellow-travelling intellectuals.

Foucault himself rejected the Stalinist tenor of Kojève's teachings in favor of those of another, and greater, French Hegelian, Jean Hyppolite, concerning whom he wrote one of his most important articles, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." The philosophical and political strands of Foucault's heritage cannot be clearly separated, nor can his cultural descent, which ran from Nietzsche through the French Surrealists and their supporters, especially Georges Bataille. Nevertheless, for purposes of exposition, it must be done, and I would start with a recursion to Hegel himself. Hegel laid down the terms even for those, like Nietzsche, Bataille, and Foucault, who rejected modernity—or, rather, who decided that the premises of modernity were unsustainable.

Classical Western philosophy had three branches: ontology, epistemology, and ethics, corresponding to the questions of being, knowledge, and action. Plato and Hegel, at the beginning and end of the classical tradition, proposed systems that included all three branches. The crucial difference between the two was in the status of the knowing subject. Plato's subject reached enlightenment by discovering what already existed in reality; Hegel's subject reached enlightenment by changes of consciousness. These changes led to a discovery of the actions and the meaning of objective Spirit, but the process was dialectical; in some real sense the objective Spirit itself was a creation of the enlightened consciousness. It is in this sense that Hegel's system, and the modern thought that builds on (or against) it, can be said to be the ultimate subjectivity. This notion of subjectivity was, as we shall see, crucial to Nietzsche as well as to Bataille.

Hegel produced the first and last complete attempt to reconcile reason and reality. What we would call true objective understanding was for Hegel an ultimate stage of subjectivity, the realization of the harmony that existed between the self and the world. In Hegel's political philosophy, the paternalistic and bureaucratic state was the ideal and proper form of human social existence, the highest manifestation of objective Spirit.

Hegel's system gave rise to disputes which have not changed their basic terms since the 1840s. The German political philosopher and leftist thinker Jürgen Habermas, with whom Foucault is often compared, defines the entire "discourse of modernity" as essentially derived from the fight over Hegel's heritage. Since that discourse has been primarily political, all serious political argument on the European Continent since 1840 has been to some extent part of this fight.

Crudely put, the basic notion common to all who appealed to Hegel in the nineteenth century was that reality should be ruled by reason. For the Hegelians of the Left the problem with the rule of reason was that it was the rule of *bourgeois* reason. Hence the task was to liberate the potentialities of reason and to overcome the one-sided rationalism of the bourgeois world. Marx himself essayed this project. (And, in our own day, Georg Lukacs, the Western Marxists of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Frankfurt School, and lately Habermas as well.) Hegelians of the Right, on the other hand, emphasized the need to have faith in the reasonableness of prevailing reality. They tended to regard the revolutionary tendencies of their Left cousins as subjective error, and to regard the socialist belief in the need and the logic of political change as romantic folly engendered by an exaggerated belief in their own rationality.

Nietzsche, finally, criticized the basis of both forms of rationality, the revolutionary as well as the conservative. For him, reason itself was nothing other than an expression of the will to power, which was the fundamental constant of human history and civilization. In all societies everywhere there are those who control and those who are controlled. Nevertheless, the means by which control is exercised differ. In premodern times, Christianity performed the function of denying the ubiquity of the will to power and of sublimating it; religion became the vehicle by which a certain type of person exercised power over society by moral injunction, exhortation, and guilt. In modern times, Nietzsche continued, we believe less in Christianity and more in science, technology, and social progress; therefore, the will to power can be seen in the use of scientific claims and political arguments. This, as I have indicated, was Foucault's view exactly. The more advanced the society, the less power is exercised as naked force and overt coercion. Instead, people internalize the will to power, and power becomes not an emanation of the state but an aspect of the most intimate relations. The distinction between the wielders and the objects of power disappears. All are at one and the same time both wielders *and* objects of power. This is the paradox of modern humanitarianism. It began in opposition to older forms of power, but once established as the chief principle of modern societies it could not avoid becoming the newest vehicle of the will to power, which is permanent and ubiquitous.

Foucault shared with Nietzsche the belief that the will to power was permanent and that conflict was the essential feature of human society. Foucault was fond of saying that politics is war carried on by other means. Since power is exercised through reason, moreover, he tended to argue, again in Nietzschean fashion, that all attempts at grasping reality involve power. In his work, the discourse of modernity in the Hegelian sense—that is, the attempt to bring reality in line with reason (whether revolutionary or conservative)—is turned on itself and shown to be merely another manifestation of the permanent will to power. Thus he almost never referred to the institutional or political changes of modern times as progress, but emphasized always their paradoxical, power-enhancing effects. He exemplified this in his studies of hospitals, armies, and prisons, and in his analysis of the systems of thought that in each period determined the purpose of such institutions. The most important of these studies are *Discipline and Punish* and other writings of the Seventies collected in English in the volume entitled *Power/Knowledge.*[4]

From Nietzsche came also the method that Foucault declared to be most appropriate to his task. This was "genealogy," as opposed to the linear evolutionary schemes of conventional historians. Foucault describes genealogy as a discovery of origins which "will never neglect as inaccessible the vicissitudes of history. On the contrary, it will cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning." Genealogy is the opposite of comprehensive analysis. The genealogist does not seek a complete explanation. Complete explanations, in Foucault's world, are rejected precisely because they are judged to be examples of the hidden power he is concerned to unmask. The secret revealed by genealogy is that things "have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in piecemeal fashion from alien forms." To Foucault, finality and essences are elements of a form of domination far more comprehensive and insidious than the coercive

4 *Power/Knowledge,* edited by C. Gordon, was published by Pantheon in 1981.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

power of political authority normally studied by historians and political scientists, which includes orthodox socialism and Marxism, with their strong beliefs in historical purpose and in a certain form of political rationalism. (Thus, Foucault felt liberated by the student rebellion of 1968 to the extent that it was not a traditional socialist movement, but rather, as he thought, an expression of the refusal to participate in traditional politics.)

Nietzsche's thought undermined the Hegelian claims to realism and rationality as much by its style, which was aphoristic and pointillistic, as by its arguments. The inspiration found by Foucault in Nietzsche was thus both cultural and philosophical, and it was expanded by Foucault's fascination with Georges Bataille.[5] Bataille's writings cover an extraordinary range, from erotic (some would say pornographic) stories to serious essays in economics and political and social anthropology. Politically he was close to the Communist Party in the Thirties and studied Kojève, but after World War II he moved away from the Stalinist Party line. In a manner probably only possible in France, he combined his dissenting Communism with a belief in the regenerative importance of liminal experiences, that is, experiences that crossed the boundaries accepted in the world of "normal life." The following passage is crucial evidence of Bataille's position, which came to mean so much to Foucault:

> The life of man, distinct from legal existence and as it takes place in fact on an isolated planet in the heavens, from day to night, from one country to the next, the life of man can in no way be limited to the closed systems assigned to it by rationalist conceptions. We can express the immense, turbulent labor of ever-flowing abandon that constitutes it by saying that it only begins where those systems fail; whatever order and reserve it allows only has meaning from the point where the forces that are ordered and reserved free themselves and lose themselves for ends which cannot be made subject to anything capable of rational accounting. It is only by virtue of such insubordination, however miserable, that the human race ceases to be isolated in the unconditional splendor of material things.[6]

Foucault took from Bataille the idea that human life is richer than any possible description of it, that its very essence is not, as orthodox economists say, scarcity, but rather excess and abandon. This idea was reflected throughout Foucault's work in two ways. First, in his constant insistence that all facets of culture, all elements in and changes of the *episteme,* had unforeseen and paradoxical consequences (paradoxical, that is, in terms of traditional rationality). For example, hospitals, founded ostensibly to cure people by virtue of a particular theory of illness, became institutions of coercion and normalization. This led directly to Foucault's most important claim, namely that in modernity, the traditional legal and political forms of power are being replaced by an even more intrusive kind of power, exercised "from below." It was to this new form of power that he gave the name "bio-power," since it was primarily wielded over the human body in the name of mental and physical health. The locus of power is thus no longer the "objective" rules of public authorities but the practices that define health, illness, and well-being.

The other way in which Bataille's notion

5 Foucault's article, "Preface à la transgression," in the issue of *Critique* devoted to Bataille after his death (August-September, 1963), is an interesting early version of his theory of sexuality. The essay appears in English in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* edited by D.F. Bouchard (Pantheon, 1977). On the Surrealists in general, Foucault contributed an early book, *Raymond Roussel* (1963), and an article on Magritte, Klee, and Kandinsky, *Ceci n'est pas un pipe,* which was published as a book, with illustrations by Magritte, in 1973. (The English translation, *This is Not a Pipe,* was published by the University of California Press in 1983.)

6 From "La notion de dépense," quoted by Jean Piel in *Critique* (August-September, 1963).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of excess was reflected in Foucault's work was in Foucault's deeply personal conviction that simple, positive description of any fact, idea, or institution is not only inadequate, but somehow immoral: "As for those for whom to take pains, to begin over and over again, to make mistakes, to start from scratch, and still to find reason to hesitate; as for those for whom, in short, to work in tentative apprehension is tantamount to failure, well, all I can say is that we clearly do not inhabit the same planet." In other words, finality is constricting and bad; discourse must be open-ended, vague, and general if it is not to be coercive. For the same reason—the belief that any simple label is unfair to its object—he distinguished between "discussion" and "polemics," praising the former while rejecting the latter: "Has anyone ever seen a new idea come out of a polemic? And how could it be otherwise, given that the interlocutors are incited, not to advance, not to take more and more risks in what they say, but to fall back continually on the rights that they claim, on their legitimacy . . . ." Apart from echoing Bataille and his vision of the richness of life, Foucault was here rejecting the Party procedures familiar to him from his youth in France. But even as he rejected the Communist Party, Foucault seems to have retained the belief that Party procedures were archetypal expressions of political power—no matter what the outward character of the regime. This belief may explain Foucault's zeal to unmask what he believed were secret coercions hidden in apparently innocuous modern social and political practices. Since the Party model is not the quintessential model of modern power, however, Foucault's debunking approach is clearly not equipped to deal with the pluralism of democratic procedures.

The effect of Bataille's erotic writings of the Thirties and Forties was to glorify liminality, which he also called heterogeneity, in opposition to the homogeneity of the bourgeois world. The concept, as Jürgen Habermas says, "condensed the basic experience of the Surrealists, who set for themselves the task of mobilizing as shockingly as possible the ecstatic forces of intoxication, dreams, and sexual drive against the imperatives of the useful, the normal, and the sober." According to Habermas, Bataille's concern, like Foucault's, was to "break out of the prison-house of modernity, out of the closed universe of the world-historically victorious reason of the West. Both wanted to overcome the subjectivism that covers the world with its reifying power and causes it to coagulate into a totality of technically available and economically definable objects."[7] The opposition to a world in which all objects, including people, are "technically available" echoes the later Heidegger, who was another influence on Foucault, although much less important than either Nietzsche or Bataille. Bataille's Communism, which came to resemble Kojève's, sits oddly with this opposition, of course. In a world-state ruled according to Stalinist principles all men and all objects would be available for manipulation by the will of the sovereign. As we have seen, this perspective repelled Foucault. And his rejection of Kojève's teachings extended to their interpretation by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. (In *Humanisme et terreur* [1946], for example, Merleau-Ponty defended the Soviet regime, arguing that true humanism and true terror were mutually necessary.)

Although Foucault rejected the political servility of Merleau, he did borrow important elements from him, particularly the notion of the human body (*le corps vécu*) as the stage on which power is enacted. "The body," Foucault would write, "is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration."

---

7 These remarks appear in *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985). An English version of this book, in my opinion the most interesting of all Habermas's work (based on lectures given at the Collège de France and at Cornell), is forthcoming from MIT Press.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Foucault's work in the Fifties and early Sixties—on the development of modern practices of health and on the rise of the modern understanding of physical and mental illness—turned out to have an immediate political dimension. Foucault's membership in the Party ended when the suppression of dissent in genetics and linguistics in the USSR by decree, and the terror exercised against dissenters, shocked him by what he saw as its analogies to what he was studying. In view of Soviet practices which were not then as notorious as they have since become —but which were still something "it was better not to talk about"—the history of madness and health was not a subject likely to be popular with the politburo of the French Communist Party. Consequently, as Foucault later drily remarked, "what I tried to do in this domain was met with a great silence among the French intellectual left."

Foucault used the word "archeology" in the titles of his three major works of the Sixties, all of which ultimately grew out of his early work on medical history: *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), subtitled in French *Une archéologie du régard médical* (which means "an archeology of medical observation," and not "medical perception," as the translation has it); *The Order of Things* (1966), subtitled *An Archaeology of the Human Sciences,* and finally *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969).[8] In a recent study of Foucault, Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow define the archeological method as one in which "the archeologist performs on all discourse and knowledge, especially our own, the same sort of distanciation of truth and meaning [i.e., by not allowing modern meanings to influence interpretation of old ones] which we naturally bring to the medical accounts and other theories of the Classical Age . . . . Once we treat the language and practices of a discipline from another age as mere meaningless objects, we can gain access to a level of description which shows that what remains incomprehensible is not without its own systematic order."[9]

The connoisseur of Continental fashions will immediately recognize the resemblance of Foucauldian "archeology" to the *structuralisme* that was marching to victory in Paris around 1960. Like Foucault, the structuralists saw human action and society as determined by their structures, which had their own autonomous existence. The pre-archeological Foucault of *Madness and Civilization* (1961) had been a prisoner, as he might put it, to an epistemology that promised true insight (valid for something beyond the discovery of past discursive practices themselves) based on "exegesis," which was his term for the interpretive method of Husserl and the early Heideger. After *Madness and Civilization,* Foucault realized that, because it relied on an external standard, exegesis was the last refuge of the tradition of humanistic scholarship. Humanism as a scholarly ethos implies, first, that there is a single standard of human reason that can explain human actions, and second, that there is genuine progress of insight and enlightenment in scholarship as well as life generally. By his "archeological" phase, Foucault had already rejected both claims.

In the introduction to *The Order of Things,* he summarized the nature and purpose of his "archeology" with untypical clarity—untypical because, as we have seen, deliberate ambiguity was regarded as a virtual moral necessity by Foucault. The investigation, he said, "will not describe the progress of knowledge toward an objective standard recognizable by our sciences of today; the purpose is rather to bring to light the . . . *episteme* within which forms of knowledge, without regard to any criterion of rational value or objective form, display their positivity and thus manifest a history which is not that of an increasing perfection, but rather that of their conditions of possibility. What

8 *The Birth of the Clinic* was published by Pantheon in 1973, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in 1982. *The Order of Things* was published by Vintage in 1971.

9 *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow; University of Chicago Press, 1982 (second edition, 1983).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I hope will appear in this account is the configurations that . . . have given rise to the various forms of empirical knowledge." The focus of interest was the mentality and entire system of perception and understanding of the classical era, seen in its own right and not merely as different from—or less adequate than—modern science.

The result of these archeological investigations was the assertion of "two great discontinuities in the *episteme* of Western culture." The *ancien régime* believed in natural history, based on the notion of the Great Chain of Being, in universal grammar, based on the notion of an original language underlying all spoken languages, and in mercantilism, based on the idea that wealth is fixed and must be hoarded. Modernity believes, by contrast, in biology, comparative grammar, and economic growth. Foucault's structuralist method is to elucidate the inner functions of the older period, which he called the Age of Representation, while denying any superior merit to modern science. He concluded by arguing that the idea of man as a rational entity with a mind and a body functioning in certain predictable ways was an illusion destined, though he does not say why, to fade like an image in the sand erased by the rising tide.

The Order of Things is in many ways a thrilling book. But the idea that past cultures, including the past of our own culture, had different standards of truth which are not *per se* inferior to our own is, of course, not original with Foucault; it was a commonplace of the historical school of the nineteenth century. The writings of Foucault's archeological period display to an irritating degree the all-too-frequent parochialism of certain Gallic writers, who with great apparatus and fanfare produce deep-sounding statements about facts or methods that have been perfectly well known for decades, if not centuries. No reader of Arthur Lovejoy in America or of Frederic Maitland in England would have the least trouble taking past systems of thought on their own terms or understanding such systems from within, according to their own code (as the structuralists say). As Frederick Crews has pointed out, however, the matter is tangled up with politics and temperament. No with-it professor of English or history in this country, even if he had heard of Lovejoy and Maitland, is going to admit to reading (much less admiring) *them* when Foucault, with his mantle of radicalism and his unmasking posture, is available to replace the blunted Marx in the great class(room) struggle.

Though much of Foucault is often as overvalued as *The Order of Things,* his writings on the subjects of power and self are useful for an understanding of modern forms of power that, like the concealed power-drive in the humanitarian impulse to improve life, are both "intentional and non-subjective." In this later period Foucault began to write and speak more openly of power in modern politics. Since his criticism of power included the intellectual power dear to the Left, he lost much of his reputation in France, at least until the turn away from Marxism took hold after 1975. By the same token, Foucault is partly responsible for the victory in much of French political culture of a critique of power that included intellectual as well as overtly political power. It remains to be seen how much of *this* Foucault is received in America, given the fact that the people in question are precisely those American Marxist and quasi-Marxist academics who assert the right to power of their own ideology. Unlike him, they completely lose their vaunted critical faculties when the question of their own interests arises. Whatever one can say of Foucault, such convenient blindness was never one of his faults.

Around 1968, Foucault returned to Nietzsche for the concept of genealogy. Foucault's discussion of forms of power in his genealogical phase often displays a curious paradox. He seems on the one hand interested simply in uncovering domination in unexpected places and presenting it for observation; on the other hand, in scattered remarks, he takes it for granted that power of any kind requires resistance. To encourage resistance, or to imply that domination

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is immoral, seems, on the face of it, to be evidence precisely of that humanitarianism which, according to Nietzsche and Foucault, is itself a particularly insidious form of power masquerading as benevolence and emancipation.

Foucault took from Nietzsche the notion of the rise, throughout modernity, of a form of domination based on claims to superior knowledge and on the ability to set standards of knowledge and truth, as opposed to domination based on specific legal and political claims. In Germany, this notion descended from Nietzsche to Max Weber and from him to a disparate group of social theorists critical of the arrogant claims of their colleagues and of the intellectual "producers of meaning" in general. These thinkers—Arnold Gehlen, Helmut Schelsky, and Friedrich Tenbruck are the most important—stood far to the right of the center in postwar West German intellectual culture. Their main argument was that the distinguishing characteristic of modern societies is the existence of an intellectual elite, a knowledge class of rulers who legitimize their own control in the shape of theories about society. Those who were close to the left-liberal and neo-Marxist center of West German culture, like Habermas, denounced these thinkers as neoconservative reactionaries. This was harder to do in Foucault's case, given his political antecedents. Also, he clothed his analysis of intellectual power in a language and style wholly different from the tradition of Weberian sociology.

Foucault arrived at the nexus of knowledge, rationality, and power from his studies in the history of medicine and the treatment of disease, both of which he saw as coercive. "Take the example of philanthropy in the early nineteenth century: people appear who make it their business to involve themselves in other people's lives, health, nutrition, housing; then, out of this confused set of functions there emerge certain personages, institutions, forms of knowledge: public hygiene, inspectors, social workers, psychologists . . . . Naturally it's medicine which has played the basic role as the common denominator." In conventional sociological analysis we are used to seeing the great change coming about when, in the welfare state of the Thirties and after, the public sector eclipsed private philanthropy. For Foucault, this shift from charity as an individual social obligation to charity as a function of the bureaucratic welfare state is part of a broader process. The process was described in an essay on Foucault by the Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor, known as a Hegel scholar and as a defender of a mildly socialist and egalitarian position:

> The picture is drawn . . . of a constellation combining modern humanitarianism, the new social sciences, and the new disciplines which develop in armies, schools, and hospitals in the eighteenth century, all seen as the formation of new modes of domination . . . . Humanitarianism itself seems to be understood as a kind of stratagem of the new growing mode of control. The new forms of knowledge serve this end. People are measured, classed, examined in various ways, and thus made the better subject to a control which tends to normalization . . . . Far from explaining the rise of this new technology of control in terms of the modern identity of man as an individual, Foucault wants to explain the modern notion of individuality as one of its products . . . . What is wielded through the modern technologies of control is . . . not concerned with law but with normalization . . . with bringing about a certain result, defined as health or good function.[10]

Here we see in part the legacy of Merleau-Ponty's *corps vécu*; the focus on the body as a locus of the exercise of power makes it a secondary matter whether therapeutic power originates in the dominant sentiments of a culture or in the welfare legislation of a modern government.

The role of government in modern social development appears at a different stage in Foucault's analysis, namely in the shape of

10 *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, by Charles Taylor (Cambridge University Press, 1985): pages 157-58.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the "well-ordered police states" of the eighteenth century. Since he was not speaking to historians, Foucault explained that the modern meaning of *police* was only about a hundred and fifty years old; before then, "'police' is the ensemble of mechanisms serving to ensure order, the properly channelled growth of wealth and the conditions of preservation of health in general." In the sixteenth century, the words "policy" and "police" were often not distinguished from one another; gradually, "policy" came to take on meanings similar to those of today. "Police," on the other hand, came to mean "a program of government rationality . . . a project to create a system of regulation of the general conduct of individuals whereby everything would be controlled to the point of self-sustenance, without the need for intervention." When the point of self-sustenance was reached, government could be restricted without sacrificing social control. The ideology of modern liberalism (in its European sense) defended this restriction of government on the grounds that people were better at managing their own affairs in society than a ruler was. Foucault argued that this ideology represented a ruse; in fact, the social control remained, but it was now automatic: the old-fashioned "police state" was no longer needed.

As in the case of *The Order of Things,* I cannot help thinking that Foucault displays more than a little historical naïveté, or at least a certain parochialism, in his discussions of the early modern "police states." He seems to fall prey to a simple nominalism, confusing a dislike or distrust of police, in the contemporary sense of the word, with the character of police in its *ancien régime* sense. As historians know, in the eighteenth century "police" was an administrative term, not an element of law enforcement. This sort of confusion of contemporary connotations of a word with its meaning at an earlier stage of the *episteme* (as it were) is of course absolutely incompatible with Foucault's emphasis on distance and on the equal validity of classical and modern forms of knowledge (and power).

Foucault has not been the only scholar to argue that the paternalistic governments of the Prussian and French "police states" entailed new forms of power, forms not easily captured in works of the older schools of legal and institutional history. In *The Well-Ordered Police State,* for example, the historian Marc Raeff argues that the social order aimed at by eighteenth-century governments was possible only because the rulers succeeded in inculcating certain values and norms that, after a certain point, no longer required positive enforcement. Though Raeff does not use the word "power," he is talking about exactly the same process that is described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* and elsewhere. In a different vein, Michael Oakeshott, the conservative English philosopher, has maintained that rationalist politics are a dangerous form of power precisely because in such politics the power claims are concealed by pretentions of philanthropy and benevolence. He devoted a third of *On Human Conduct* to the ways in which the administration of power over people grew in early modern states, and to the psychological attitudes and dispositions underlying choices of power.

The generalizing, pointillistic style and the air of revelation of long-kept secrets with which Foucault displayed ideas well known to professional scholars obscures the force of his description of modern power. The central element of that description is his insistence on the Nietzschean position that "there can be no such thing as a truth independent of its regime, unless it be that of another," expressed in an interview on "Truth and Power" given in 1977.

> Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power . . . . truth isn't the reward of free spirits . . . nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.
>
> In societies like ours, the "political economy" of truth is characterized by five important traits. "Truth" is centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power); it is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption . . . ; it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses . . . lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation . . . .
>
> It is necessary to think of the political problems of intellectuals not in terms of "science" and "ideology," but in terms of "truth" and "power."

Though it is clear how the Foucault who argued this way was quite welcome to some of the revolutionaries of 1968, particularly those who wanted to destroy the university, it is equally clear that they could not be really comfortable with him for long. Foucault's strength, which is also his weakness, is that he was never able to contemplate an example of rationality or a triumph of reason without simultaneously seeing its potential for danger—danger to the very liberation or progress which it had just helped to achieve. "How can we exist as rational beings, fortunately committed to practicing a rationality that is unfortunately crisscrossed by intrinsic dangers?" This question could almost be Foucault's life motto.

The tendency to view power as a moral problem rather than a fact with moral effects is, of course, a common trait of the modern temper, particularly of the leftist temper, as it was once defined by the Catholic existentialist Jacques Maritain. Maritain distinguished a physiological (as he called it) from a political meaning of Left and Right. The first meaning was the more important, since it circumscribed unchangeable types of temperament. "The pure man of the Left," wrote Maritain, "despises Being, always preferring in principle, as Rousseau put it, *that which is not* to *that which is*; the pure man of the Right hates justice and charity, always preferring in principle, as Goethe put it . . . *injustice* to *disorder*."[11] Nietzsche well illustrates the difference between Maritain's physiological and political senses of Right and Left. He was certainly by temperament an almost pure example of the Right, yet politically he despised conservatives, especially the German nationalists who engineered the process of German political unification in 1866-71. Foucault, his modern admirer, to some extent illustrated the opposite condition. His critique of the politics of truth in modern societies, and of therapeutic domination—that is, social control in the name of health, order, or universal betterment—put at least that part of him close to the "new philosophers" and to some neoconservatives. On the other hand, his Bataille-inspired conviction that any system is limiting, and that full life begins where the systems end, was closer to Maritain's temperament of the Left. "The questions I am trying to ask are not determined by a pre-established political outlook . . . . I am attempting, on the contrary, apart from any *totalization*—which would be at once *abstract* and *limiting*—to *open up* problems . . . that approach politics from behind and cut across societies on the diagonal."

Following *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault turned to what became his last major project, the *History of Sexuality.* It was originally planned to be a six-volume study of modern subjectivity as expressed in ideas of sex-

11 From *Lettre sur l'indépendance* (1935), which appears in the sixth volume of *Oeuvres complètes,* by Jacques and Raissa Maritain (Paris: Editions Saint-Paul, 1984). There is much else of interest in this passage, including the remark that "the most terrible rev olutions are revolutions of the Left made by temperaments of the Right," such as Lenin.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

uality. In his by now standard manner, Foucault proposed to show that this idea was a constituent of the modern *episteme*. The notion of sexuality as something repressed in modern bourgeois society and hence deserving of liberation was, he claimed, itself imposed by a certain epistemology and psychology. "The self experience whereby we have a sexual nature which is held down or confined by rules and tabus is itself a creation of the new kind of power/control. In going for liberation, we see ourselves as escaping a power understood on the old model. But in fact we live under a power of the new kind." (Namely, the "bio-power" of mutual domination.) After volume one, which unmasked Freudian and other theories of sexual health as forms of power, Foucault changed course. The three volumes he subsequently wrote concern not the modern end of the Western *episteme*, but its distant origins in the ancient and early Christian "care of self." He explained the shift and its dependence on his earlier work as follows:

> The idea was to investigate how individuals were led to practice, on themselves and others, a hermeneutics of desire . . . . In order to understand how the modern individual could experience himself as the subject of a "sexuality," it was necessary first to extricate the way in which Western man throughout the centuries came to recognize himself as a subject of desire.
>
> A theoretical shift had seemed necessary to analyze what was often called the advance of learning; it had led me to ask questions concerning the types of discursive practice that articulated knowledge [i.e., *The Archaeology of Knowledge*]. A theoretical shift had also been needed to analyze what is often called the manifestations of "power"; it had led me rather to ask questions on the multiple relations, the overt strategies and rational techniques that articulated the exercise of power [i.e., *Discipline and Punish*]. It now seemed necessary to undertake a third shift, to analyze what is called "the subject"; it seemed appropriate to find out what were the forms and means of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself as a subject . . . . I had to choose: either to maintain the original plan and adding to it a brief historical sketch of this theme of desire, or to reorganize the entire study around the gradual formation in Antiquity of a hermeneutics of self. I chose the latter option, reflecting that after all for many years I have adhered to the project of disentangling some of the elements that might serve for a history of truth.

The next three volumes, which Foucault lived to complete (the fourth volume of the work is being prepared for publication in 1986), describe Greek and Roman attitudes to sexuality and point out how many of them survived into Christianity and hence into our Western *episteme*. The main difference was that the Greek care of self was focused on self-mastery for the sake of civic life. James Harkness describes Foucault's view of the Greeks this way: "Embodied in 'techniques of the self' and an 'art of living,' the usage of pleasures imposed shapeliness on sensitive, highly charged areas of life, an order independent of intrusive legal or political enforcement." In Christianity, on the other hand, self-restraint was commanded by religion, and the care of self came to include the care of others through the Church. This care of others gradually built up, or was built up by, a system of "pastoral power," which was occasionally contested by medieval heretical sects and later, more successfully, in the Protestant Reformation. But Protestantism continued pastoral power in other forms, one of them being the "police state" of eighteenth-century Prussia, another being the intrusive philanthropy of the Protestant Victorians. Thus Foucault (for volume four of the *History* stops with the earliest Christians) produced yet another turn back to his concern with forms of power.

As James Harkness points out, the *History of Sexuality*, especially volumes two and three, "will be widely regarded as works of 'gay liberation,' aimed at historically legitimating homosexual eroticism and life-styles,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

because Foucault devoted considerable space to Greek homoeroticism. Foucault, however, had no interest in presenting a brief for homosexuality; such an essentially polemical procedure was alien to his principles. On the contrary, he found in the Greeks' thought on homosexuality precisely the point at which

> they formulated the need for the most rigorous austerities . . . and the principle of "indefinite abstention". . . . We see, in Greek culture and in relation to the love of boys, the formation of some of the major elements of sexual ethics that would reject it precisely on account of this principle: the need for symmetry and reciprocity in relations of love, [and] the need for a difficult and laborious struggle with oneself . . . . The fact is that the demand of total abstention and the privilege granted to the question of desire introduced elements that were not easy to accommodate within the search for the usage of pleasures.

Foucault, in the end, is perhaps less ambiguous than some of his admirers will make him. He maintained a Nietzschean neutrality toward the claims of modern doctrines, including Marxism and the vague rationalist liberalism on which the political consensus of most Western countries seems to rest. His intellectual and political anarchism, however, also led him, as we have seen, to claim that his posture of unmasking and of discovering coercive elements in every single habit, institution, and idea of human society was the only responsible one. Yet his revelations were accompanied by a personal stance that was open to abuse by persons with political agendas that, according to his own principles, ought to be rejected. His political gestures were eclectic: he was in favor of the student rebels of 1968, the New York homosexuals in the Seventies, the "new philosophers" in 1977-79, and against Soviet repression in Poland in 1982-84. Such eclecticism allows for the selective use of his ideas for political purposes. We should probably expect the Foucault boom on the American academic Left to continue. Its object is not the disinterested study of past ideas but the "unmasking" of contemporary American society as illegitimate. The fact that Foucault's analysis applies equally well to that leftist ideology itself will not be recognized, partly because Foucault's own anarchism was, finally, inadequate as an instrument of political analysis of the challenges of our time.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Josef Albers: in the engine room of modern art

by Eric Gibson

On this shelf alone I have eighty different kinds of yellow and forty grays.
—Josef Albers

What does color do? To early nineteenth-century eyes and those before, an apple was green, flesh pink, in life and so in art. Then in the 1860s Monet and other Impressionists, drawing on certain insights of Delacroix and the physicist Michel Eugène Chevreul, began handling color differently. These artists learned that local color—the intrinsic color of an object—was not fixed but mutable; it was affected by atmospheric conditions as well as by the reflections of adjacent objects. In their quest for objective optical fidelity, the Impressionists altered forever the way color was conceived and used. "Liberated" from the object it depicted, color became a function of the eye, a purely optical phenomenon. And here lies one of the more interesting paradoxes in the history of art. In its scrupulous attention to matters of visual fact, Impressionism brought to a climax the Western naturalist tradition initiated by the Renaissance; but it also brought that tradition to an end by providing the foundation for an art in which color played a commanding role—abstract and nonobjective art.

Like pictorial space in Renaissance painting, Impressionist innovations in the use of color became one of modernism's chief tools of operation; it also became one of its "subjects." Freed from the conventions which had formerly governed its use, color loomed for a succession of avant-garde painters as one of the most vital and fundamental artistic challenges. Parallel to and sometimes in concert with Cubist structure, color served as an alternative to narrative subject matter and the Renaissance type of picture construction which that subject matter seemed to call for. Color functioned variously as the principal vehicle of feeling and ideas and as the means of creating a nonperspectival pictorial space. Over time, color came to serve almost every expressive impulse in painting, conveying emotional and psychological states, metaphysical yearnings, constructivist principles, and the desire for purely optical sensation.

Almost from the moment the color genie was let out of the bottle, certain artists began searching for a surer understanding of what it was and how it worked. Color's fullest artistic powers, in their view, could only be realized by joining the analytical faculties of the eye with those of the intellect. To be avoided was simply abandoning color to the unsteady currents of emotion. This analytical approach to color had its source in the mercurial, Janus-faced nature of color itself, which was recognized to be not only an instrument of art but also a phenomenon of physics, composed of light waves and subject to the laws of science. The analytical approach derived as well from the nineteenth-century faith in the efficacy of the scientific method. Seurat, of course, was the first to take this approach to color. Dissatis-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fied with the effect of Impressionist color on pictorial form, he brought to painting a more conceptual approach to structure and a more "scientific" method of handling color. Cézanne, less "scientific" though no less intellectual, likewise transformed Impressionist facture into touches of color, each one functioning to define a form, locate it in space, and tie it to the flat surface of the picture. In the hands of such vanguard groups as the Nabis, the Fauves, the Blue Rider group, and the other German expressionists, color served in the main as an outlet for sometimes violent emotional expression, and as a means of aesthetic provocation whenever the artistic order was thought to be in need of renovation. It was not until Josef Albers arrived at the Bauhaus in the Twenties that the analytical approach to color was taken up again. In Albers's hands it was transformed with extraordinary singlemindedness into a systematic program which was to become the focus of his life's work.

Oddly, though, when the subject of color painting is raised today, figures other than Josef Albers come to mind—Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland, among the Color-field painters, for example, and Matisse, with his pure, saturated hues. And one would be hard pressed to find Albers's name listed on any decade-by-decade roster of top artists. Even in Irving Sandler's *The New York School,* the standard text on American art of the Fifties, Albers receives but three, brief references. Yet the Fifties was the decade that saw Albers at the height of his career, widely recognized as an artist, serving as head of the Yale School of Art, and exhibiting extensively on both sides of the Atlantic.

It seems to have been Albers's fate to inhabit something of a twilight zone in the art-historical landscape and to do so even today. By his involvement with color, he placed himself at the center of the aesthetic issues of his time. Moreover, he was one of the few significant figures from modernism's early or middle years to have stayed the course, so to speak, continuing as a vital force for the duration of his life—and even after. Yet he somehow remains *hors concours,* an equivocal figure—acknowledged for his contribution but otherwise ignored.

Clearly, this fate has to do with the nature of Albers's work. Because he restricted himself in his later years to a single, unitary motif which varied only slightly from painting to painting, it is difficult to chart the course of his career in the usual way. One cannot really speak of highs and lows of achievement, of phases that are preparatory, transitional, or mature—nor, alas, of the creation of masterpieces. His work is too limited in its scope for that kind of critical analysis. Albers's aesthetic was not directed toward the articulation of a particular view of experience or an inner vision; rather it was rigorously didactic. His paintings have the feel of scientific demonstration, sharing with certain scientific procedures a systematic approach which eliminates all possible variables. The difference is, of course, that Albers was not out to prove a hypothesis. He achieved his results, as any artist does, through an empirical process of trial and error. Yet the experience of an Albers painting is very different from that of others, even Mondrian's or Malevich's. Albers's paintings are meant to be read, one might even say tested, for their optical qualities above all else. For this purpose they appear to be directed not so much to the emotions as to the retina.

In order to understand Albers's odd position in recent art history, it is important to acknowledge his career as a teacher. Albers was never one of those artists for whom teaching was a necessary evil—a means of paying the rent until something better came along. Rather, like Hans Hofmann, he was so intellectually and morally involved with teaching that it constituted an ethic, a way of life. Indeed, one can say of Albers, as one cannot say of Hofmann, that without the teacher there would have been no artist. This placed him at some remove from the mainstream of the art world. His main audience became a small but growing group of artists-in-the-making rather than the deal-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ers, journalists, critics, art historians, and museum curators who normally "make" an artist's name. No doubt this strong pedagogical orientation, and the austere, recondite character of Albers's work, account in part for our obscure view of him today.

This situation was clarified somewhat in February by the large exhibition held at the Sidney Janis Gallery. Albers's color work was present in generous quantity, of course —selections from the *Homage to the Square* series, their smaller studies on blotting paper, as well as a few *Variants,* the predecessors to the *Homages* in the study of color. Also included were numerous *Structural Constellations,* Albers's "drawings"—they are really white lines machine-etched into black plastic—of imaginary three-dimensional geometric shapes which continually reform themselves before our eyes in the manner of psychologists' images of cubes and staircases, which appear one moment to be seen from above, the next moment from below. The sight of all these stark, repeated images, arrayed for the most part in a single horizontal row on each wall, gave one the unreal sensation of having entered a hushed, airless chamber from which everything that did not bear upon the meticulous pursuit of a single idea had been scrupulously evacuated.

Ten years after the artist's death, the exhibition offered us the opportunity to bring Albers into clearer focus on strictly artistic grounds and to address once again the questions raised by his work. How much can art become a province of science—or vice versa —before some crucial element is permanently sacrificed? Or is this never an issue in Albers's work? Some claim a spiritual dimension for his art, maintaining that it amounts to more than optical experimentation, but is this so?

The underlying premise of Albers's work is that two or more colors placed in juxtaposition will interact with and alter one another regardless of how the colors looked when they first came out of the tube. This is a simple enough idea in itself. But you have to go back to nineteenth-century color theory, and then to Albers's years at the Bauhaus, in order to grasp the meaning it acquired for his work.

The color theory, if it can be called that, of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism was grounded in three axiomatic propositions. The first was that purer, more intense mixes of color—green, for example—can be achieved by juxtaposing the component colors on the canvas rather than by blending them on the palette first. This method of "optical mixture" was practiced by Delacroix in his murals at the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, to which Seurat was a frequent pilgrim. The second and third propositions come from Michel Eugène Chevreul, the chief dye-master at the Gobelin tapestry factory. In 1839 he published his "Law of the Simultaneous Contrast of Colors," in which he stated that juxtaposed complementaries intensify one another. A later edition of the "Law" added a corollary, that a particularly vivid color will, if looked at for any length of time, generate a "halo" or afterimage which is the complementary of that color. Moreover, if that intense hue has a weak color next to it—that is, one not as vivid—the complementary afterimage will affect the weak color too.[1]

When Albers entered the Bauhaus in 1921, these ideas and others concerning color were being disseminated by Johannes Itten, the mystical, charismatic Swiss painter-theoretician who taught a foundation course. As part of his introductory work, Albers took Itten's course. When Itten resigned in 1923 in a dispute with Walter Gropius, Albers took over some of Itten's duties. Even before that, however, soon after his arrival in fact,

1 All colors have complementaries, but the simplest way of understanding Chevreul is to limit oneself to the primaries—red, blue, and yellow. The complementary of any one of them is achieved by mixing the other two. Thus, blue's complementary is orange, a mixture of red and yellow. According to Chevreul's first law, blue and orange are each more vivid when next to each other than when isolated. According to his second law, an intense blue would generate an orange "halo."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Albers set himself off from the rest of the students. Having completed the six-month preliminary course, he was slated to proceed to the next phase—mural painting. He refused, wanting instead to make glass "paintings"—relief compositions of colored shards of glass applied to a transparent support. Risking expulsion, he insisted, and finally won permission. Within a short time he was actually teaching in the glass workshop. What is striking about this episode is not so much the defiance as the character of Albers's work, even then. At the outset his "paintings" were random arrangements of broken glass, but as the influence de Stijl became stronger at the Bauhaus they soon acquired a more rigorous order. The shards became more uniform in size and shape (usually a square), and Albers arranged them in a grid format on a thin wire support which itself made a grid pattern that was visible through the glass. Increasingly, in deciding what was to go where, Albers began focusing on the relationships between colors.

When Itten left the Bauhaus, his course was divided between László Moholy-Nagy and Albers, the latter having responsibility for the Bauhaus instruction in basic materials. Students selected straw, cellophane, or paper, which then had to be operated upon, by folding, cutting, and so on, in ways that would reveal the material's essential properties—its structural, textural, and visual characteristics. The idea was to be as inventive as possible with the minimum number of tools and operations; aesthetics were of interest only insofar as they were expressed through the character of the material.

It was this Bauhaus view of teaching as the systematic exploration of materials that decisively shaped Albers's artistic and pedagogical outlook. In his case, however, the one "material" that came to matter above all others was the one that was in fact immaterial—color. At some point in his development, what Albers referred to as "the discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect" of color—in other words, its mutability—registered in a way that nothing else did. Color itself became for him something mysterious, almost mystical, something beyond lightwaves or optics or pigment. Albers acknowledged as much in his often-repeated view that in this discrepancy lay "the beginnings of art," a statement which gives to his work the status of a philosophical quest. Perhaps it was the sight of light passing through an early glass painting, igniting the shards and transforming them, that furnished the insight. In any event, his overpowering compulsion to probe this mystery —to insert himself, as it were, between the physical fact and the psychic effect of color in order to fathom "the beginnings of art"—led him to an involvement with color that increased in complexity with every succeeding stage. Solutions begat further questions, not resolutions; the path of color exploration led into a hall of mirrors opening on infinity. In this, too, perhaps, Albers saw something of the magical.

As color became Albers's personal "material," certain changes served to distance him from his Bauhaus origins. First, Albers extended the Bauhaus concept of materials, since color, having no three-dimensional existence, is not a "material" in the strict sense, capable of being bent and shaped into different configurations. Second, Albers aestheticized the Bauhaus idea, since color retained its ability to sway the senses even under the narrow terms of Albers's theory. Thus, he endowed color with a quality for the most part lacking in the pieces of paper and straw that he and his students had worked with earlier. In the process of these changes, the Bauhaus curriculum which Albers had absorbed and taught was elevated to a plane so abstract, so rarefied as to virtually sever any connection between the investigation of color and the everyday practice of art. They came to occupy the same relation to each other that number theory in mathematics does to computing the weekly grocery bill.

Perhaps this is why Albers's color course is such a curious experience. Albers's book, *The Interaction of Color* (1963), which constitutes something of a treatise on color and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is an outline of the course he taught for most of his life, reads like a primer, and in places has a sharply didactic tone: "On the blackboard and in our notebooks we write: color is the most relative medium in art." In addition, the book reveals a sure confidence in the revelatory capabilities of Albers's systematic method. No one, he seems to believe, can fail to grasp the workings of color, or the importance of color, after following his lessons.

The course consisted of posing a series of problems—making two colors look like one, one look like two, making colors advance or recede—which were to be solved entirely by trial and error, or what Albers used to call "thinking in situations." Students worked with colored papers clipped from magazines, these offering—in the early days, anyway—a greater variety of palette than store-bought paints; these colors were purer, too, and did not lend themselves to the distracting expressionist facture that is possible in paint. To assure that the most stringent conditions prevailed in these exercises, Albers strove to eliminate as many variables as possible, restricting shape and texture to rectilinear and flat, and of course limiting the role of color to optical rather than emotional ends.

To say the least, this was quite different from other methods of teaching art which had evolved as the full impact of Abstract Expressionism came to be felt in the galleries and art schools. Albers distrusted expressionism, believing it to be egocentric and geared mostly toward effects rather than insight. He felt that his method, with its rigorous discipline, offered his students the surest form of art training by making them more reflective and self-critical.

Anyone who has ever taken Albers's color course, as I did while a student in college, cannot have escaped the feelings of detachment and frustration it engenders. The eerie detachment comes from our recognition of the odd position color occupies in such a program. It is completely removed from any function. If the Impressionists "liberated" color from its depictive role, Albers—in this color course—went one step further, removing it from any aesthetic function at all. It serves only as a vehicle of cerebration. Color now reflects back on itself, existing to reveal color alone. Freed of any representational or formal functions, color in Albers's didactic discourse floats free in the eye and in the mind—disembodied in a realm of pure thought.

Hence one's frustration. So great is one's sense of removal from the regular activity of art-making, that one soon begins asking oneself what larger purpose these exercises can possibly serve. Has art, one wonders, really been reduced to this?

The hundred-odd studies in *The Interaction of Color*—not all of them done by Albers—are by no means the measure of his output as an artist. Between 1950 when he began the *Homage to the Square* series—paintings in which a few squares of diminishing size appear superimposed—and his death twenty-five years later, he executed over one thousand of these studies. The Janis exhibition was something of a revelation in this respect. One had the impression that if it had been doubled in size and doubled again, we still would not have seen everything we needed to see. And yet, in a way, with Albers a single painting will tell you everything you need to know.

The show's focus was just right, in terms of its presenting the later, American Albers, for the *Variants* mark the moment when he began to minimize the formal properties of his work—shape, figure-ground relationships, and so on—the better to concentrate on color. Earlier works, such as the *Treble Clef* paintings of the early Thirties, had explored chromatic and formal variations simultaneously. From the *Variants* onward, every aspect of the image evolves with the effects of color in mind. Color is addressed in isolation, while the *Structural Constellations* now satisfy his interest in pure form, an interest as hostage to the optical as color.

The *Variants* both create the illusion of color planes overlapping and interacting like

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pieces of colored tissue paper and set up independent optical interactions across the picture surface. Typically, a *Variant* will be restricted to three or four colors, applied, as is the case with the *Homages,* directly from the tube. Both series are painted on masonite, which gives them the kind of brittle, unyielding surface texture common to panel painting and which is so different from the warmth that results from applying paint to canvas or linen—or staining it. Horizontal in format, a *Variant* will be built up of a ground color "over" which one or two smaller rectangles are laid. "Over" them in turn a rectilinear U-form is placed, followed by a smaller rectangle in each of the U's verticals. In one, from 1956-1958, the ground color is a forest-green, and the diminishing planes are orange-ochre, light orange-tan, and sienna.[2] One's initial perception of advancing and receding planes is, however, gradually compromised, as whole rectangles divide and subdivide, breaking down the straightforward illusion and setting the planes moving back and forth in space independently of one another, ambiguously, in open defiance of the simple constructive logic that seemed to prevail only a moment before. All this is achieved through color alone, and takes place exclusively in the optical realm.

Although possessed of a new directness and purity, the *Variants* are only partly successful. They are visually active in ways extraneous to the color interactions they are designed to serve. There is too great a variety of shapes, and in places a distracting linear rhythm asserts itself, generated by the edge of one shape abutting another. Moreover, the inherent instability of the motif—floating planes moving back and forth in space—is too unsettling, too distracting. It almost becomes the "subject" of the painting itself.

Perhaps sensing this, and as part of the continuing desire to eliminate the extraneous in his work, Albers abandoned the eccentrically rectilinear format of the *Variants* for the quintessential geometric figure —the square. With its easier legibility and greater simplicity of form, Albers attains a Platonic sense of proportion and measure, and an almost Olympian detachment. Within the paintings of the *Homage to the Square* series, the viewer inhabits the most rarefied of aesthetic atmospheres.

A color logic different from that of the *Variants* obtains in these paintings. Albers abandons the illusion of colors "mixing," and simply places them side by side, permitting a freer, less forced dialogue between them and in the process activating more striking effects. A sequence of five paintings in the Janis exhibition vividly brings home this new development. All use identical shades of canary-yellow and battleship-gray, as well as other, intermediate, colors. Each painting orders the colors differently in order to alter their perceived spatial relations and hues. In one, the yellow square occupies the center, framed by yellow-green, which is in turn framed by the gray. The yellow square appears to float in front of the yellow-green's hazy, amorphous space, with the more brittle gray fixing the picture plane and retaining all optical activity within its borders. Shuffle the combination, as Albers does, placing gray at the center, yellow at the perimeter, and a yellow-tan in the middle, and the gray darkens considerably, eventually radiating a yellow halo that lightens the adjacent tan color while effectively doubling the intensity of the surrounding yellow.

Elsewhere in this *Homage* series, Albers will play with construction. Using shades of red, in one painting he will set up a measured procession of planes advancing toward the viewer, while in another almost identical reds will dissolve into one another, the whole an indistinct, smoky, interior haze.

2 Except in the lexicons of household paint and of cosmetics manufacturers, color in the twentieth century has proceeded ahead of language. The eye can perceive more hues, shades, and tints than the mind can reliably name. The reader will have to forgive my awkward and approximate terms in describing these paintings.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The optical onus has shifted from the picture surface to the eye in these *Homages*. Looking at them, one feels oneself to be a trigger activating an inert mechanism. This situation greatly alters our relation to the *Homages* as works of art. With their residual pictorial illusionism, the *Variants* were the last of Albers's paintings to belong to art-making in the traditional sense, where the viewer was given something to look at and was at the same time involved in the ordering of the multiple component parts into a greater whole. The *Homage to the Square* series severs that link with the past by locating the experience of the work of art solely within the mechanics of vision. Looking becomes a mechanical operation, a series of tests set up on behalf of the viewer and set in motion by him.

Is this, then, all there is to be seen in the *Homage to the Square* series? Other artists have embraced geometric abstraction in order to achieve an effect of transcendence, to express some spiritual longing or state, to define the limits of pictorial possibility. For Albers, the appeal of the nonobjective lies elsewhere, in its easy adaptation to systematic development, in its freedom from association, and in its universality. His tightly bound chromatic precincts are not corridors to higher states of feeling but physical realizations of ideal laboratory conditions of clarity and constancy, wherein the ongoing investigation can be conducted free of distraction. Albers's one concession to the senses is the off-center quality of these works—they appear weighted toward the bottom—a quality he felt made them less impersonal and more human. Does this quality point to others?

Albers would have answered in the affirmative. He believed art was more than problem solving, that his mission was to increase visual flexibility and perceptiveness. He encouraged his students to go beyond his exercises to discover their own inner vision. Beyond that, however, Albers also claimed for his pictures a measure of spirituality, a view centered in the seemingly magical, mysterious capacity of color to transform itself before our eyes independently of visible human agency. In an interview Albers once observed:

> I like to take a very weak color and make it rich and responsive by working on its neighbors. What's gloomier than raw sienna? Now look what I've done to it there; it's gold. It's shining and alive, like an actor on stage. Turning sand into gold, that's my work and aim.[3]

And it is true that we too witness breathtaking, alchemical transformations of color. When these are combined with the space he achieves in some of the red paintings—amorphous and seemingly endless—fleeting glimpses present themselves of a realm beyond the optical here-and-now. But Albers's very aesthetic precludes such spiritual extensions. For one thing, the optical, rather than harmonic, basis of the color relationships works against them, as does the unsettling back-and-forth movement of planes. What Albers offers us is an unstable universe in which nothing is fixed but the shape of the support and the highly circumscribed nature of the experience afforded the viewer.

Like that of so many strong, charismatic figures—which, from what his many students have said, is what Albers was—his influence was chiefly of a moral kind. It is true that Kenneth Noland was his student at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where Albers taught for sixteen years after arriving in this country in 1933 in flight from Germany—but then so was Robert Rauschenberg. Besides, Noland's color painting came out of Pollock and Rothko rather than Albers. It never became as hermetic or as aesthetically isolated as Albers's did. In any case, Noland's approach was sensuous and romantic. Albers can be said to have contributed something to the origins of Optical Art in the Sixties—a dubious distinction—but to compare the two is to be aware at once of the gulf that separates them, and thus of the meaning of Albers's life and work.

---

3 Sam Hunter, ed., *Josef Albers, Paintings and Graphics, 1917-1970*, Princeton, 1971, pp. 5-6.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The whole Albers—for one cannot consider painting, teaching, and writing in isolation—was an artist in the tradition of such figures as Piero della Francesca and Leon Battista Alberti. For each of them, art was part of a drive for a larger understanding—pictorial space for Piero and Alberti, color for Albers. Their work is a mental picture of an ideal order of things. In Albers's case that ideal consists of color operating and revealing itself unimpeded by line, shape, or associative image. Like the domestic architecture of Mies van der Rohe—Albers's contemporary and the last director of the Bauhaus in Germany—Albers's paintings are pure abstractions, and not simply because they are nonobjective. Mies sacrifices the governing premise of architecture—habitability—for clarity, poise, and order, and Albers does something similarly radical in the realm of art: he severs a vital connection with orthodox image-making. Both men symbolize the operations of the mind freed from the burden of utility.

Albers's work was fated by its very nature to remain unfinished. Unlike other artists who are able to make and remake their world within a prescribed compass, Albers's chromatic hall of mirrors offered him no comparable possibility of completion. Necessarily, this conditioned both his role and his identity as an artist. The act of reducing one of the principal aesthetic concerns of modern art—color—to a series of self-contained mechanical operations effectively made him a kind of mechanic as well. One thinks of him, finally, as a *machiniste,* the man in the engine room of modern art. Tending a burner that had been fired a century before, and able to see the world through only the smallest of apertures, he worked away endlessly, firm in the conviction that his isolated, secluded labors were propelling the ship on a course toward True North.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poems *by Jane Kenyon, Robert Pack & John Frederick Nims*

Small early valentine

Wind plays the spy,
opens and closes doors,
looks behind shutters—
a succession of clatters. I
know perfectly well
where you are: in that
not-here-place you go to,
the antipodes. I have your note
with flight and phone numbers
for the different days . . . .
Dear one, I have made the bed
with the red sheets. I'm your
Penelope, our dog
the dog who lay
on the deep pile of dung,
lifting his head and ears
when after ten years
Odysseus approached him.

—Jane Kenyon

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Spring changes

The autumnal drone of my neighbor
cutting wood across the pond
and the soundlessness of winter
give way to hammering. Must be
he's roofing, or building a shed
or fence. Some form of spring-induced
material advance.

Mother called early to say she's sold the house.
I'll fly out, help her sort and pack,
and give and throw away. One thing I'd like:
the yellow hand-painted pottery
vase that's crimped at the edge
like the crust of a pie—so gay, but
they hardly ever used it, who knows why?

A new young pair will paint and mow,
and fix the picket fence, wash windows face
to face in May, he outside on a ladder,
she inside on a chair, mouthing kisses
and "Be Careful!" through the glass.

—Jane Kenyon

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The clearing

The dog and I push through the ring
of dripping junipers
to enter the open space high on the hill
where I let him off the leash.

He vaults, snuffling, between tufts of moss;
twigs snap beneath his weight; he rolls
and rubs his jowls on the aromatic earth;
his pink tongue lolls.

I look for sticks of proper heft
to throw for him, while he sits, prim
and earnest in his love, if it is love.

All night a soaking rain, and now the hill
exhales relief, and the fragrance
of warm earth. The sedges
have grown an inch since yesterday,
and ferns unfurled, and even if they try
the lilacs by the barn can't
keep from opening today.

I longed for spring's thousand tender greens,
and the white-throated sparrow's call
that borders on rudeness. Do you know—
since you went away
I've done little
but wait for you to come back to me.

—Jane Kenyon

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

While we were arguing

The first snow fell,—or should I say
it flew slantwise, so it seemed
it was the house
that moved so heedlessly through space.

Tears splashed and beaded on your sweater.
Then for long moments you did not speak.
No pleasure in the cups of tea
I made distractedly at four . . . .

The sky grew dark. I heard the paper come
and went out. The moon looked down
between disintegrating clouds. I said
aloud: "You see, we have done harm."

—Jane Kenyon

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Neanderthal poem ah number one

Although one letter a is identical to another a, words and sentences can be different . . . . Likewise, in our universe there are only a few fundamental building blocks: quarks, leptons, and gluons. These are the letters of the alphabet of nature. With this rather small alphabet, words are made—these are atoms. The words are strung together, with their own special grammar—the laws of quantum theory—to form sentences, which are molecules. Soon we have books, entire libraries, made out of molecular "sentences." . . . Out of identity came difference.
—Heinz R. Pagels, The Cosmic Code

Leaping leptons, gluons, and quarks—
difference from identity!
Sound me the *a,* Professor Pagels, from your name,
sound me a *b*;

ra! ra! we've started, now a *c,*
ca—abracadabra;
dance me the prestidigitation of the alphabet
back to an *a* released as *ah*!

ah as in qu*a*rk: and thus an *a,* conjoined
with *ah,* prolonged and rounded,
might have been the primal word
for joy unbounded

from astonished ape-like lips—an *ah,* an *ahr,*
resounding from the lungs,
reverberating *hahr* up to the teeth,
until the tongue,

discovering a purpose to its taste,
plucked teasing, consonantal *t,*
and thus gave shape to *heart,*
atomic word for the anatomy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of art, for speech, *ah* yes, delighting
in its parts. Words are a lake
in which we look, Professor Pagels, partner, at
ourselves, reflecting what we make,

as morning brightens crimson in the mist,
from what we hear and see—
a rondo of frogs rumbling,
light wind lilting lento in the willow tree.

Such mimic long *o* wind words
bind us over silent distances, although
we two, in fact, have never met;
and yet in thought I go

with you where, glowing gluons!, your thoughts go.
So if you read these
ahs, these *ohs,* this cry of origins,
call of identities,

perhaps you'll follow me over
the glade, over the clover-purple hill,
where once my father led me—I
can see him still—

to find the spring that starts the minnow stream
that sloshes over pebbles burbling
through the pendant, orange jewelweed,
then bubbles loudly, merging

with the courting bullfrog bellows echoed
in the cattail marshes all
along the margins of the lake. There you can hear
the world's first bard Neanderthal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bleat out an *a* into an *ah*! And *oh,*
Professor Pagels, *ah* and *oo,*
across the separating spaces everywhere,
from you to me and me to you,

molecular sentences flow
connecting differentiated strangers, *oo*! Trees
bloom with leaves of words; *oh*s blow
from the low lake to cool entire libraries.

—*Robert Pack*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In Venice, the light airs

The Apothecaries haue Bookes of Gold, whose leaves being opened are so light as that they are subiect to be shaken with the least breath, yet rightly handled, they serue both for ornament and vse; such are light Ayres.

By gold marquees the iron men tell time
And time tells iron men the way to rust.
Rust?—if the word go rummaging for rhyme
It scuffs what all journeys tumble into: *dust.*
Venice had water once, and has it yet
—Through wrack, and the dusty opulence of gold.
Gold?—loaded word: each resonance a threat
Of winter, age, sad bells. Lives bought and sold.

Airs take you, errant, where you're loath to go
(Every enchantment's coupled with a curse).
Breath moved to *pleasure,* but the lip fussed, *woe*;
Aspired to *better,* but the lip curled, *worse.*
Words stray, like funnel clouds, and trail debris;
Light airs make mockery of the gulled marquee.

—*John Frederick Nims*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Music

The LaSalle Quartet, and Pierre Boulez

by Samuel Lipman

The LaSalle String Quartet has long been one of the most respected chamber music ensembles of the day. The group was founded in 1949 by four students at the Juilliard School of Music in New York. Its name was taken neither from the pre-World War II, second-line Cadillac automobile nor directly from the French explorer, but rather from the short and not very elegant street just down Claremont Avenue from the old Juilliard building on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

The LaSalle has been quartet-in-residence at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music since 1953, and has toured extensively in the United States and Europe. Three of its present members, including violinists Walter Levin and Henry Meyer and violist Peter Kamnitzer, all founders of the group, were born in Germany in the early 1920s; cellist Lee Fiser, who joined in 1975, was born in Oregon in 1947. The predominantly European origin of its members, another example of Hitler's unintended musical gifts to the United States, has combined with the numerous recordings made by the quartet for Deutsche Grammophon to create the image of a European quartet providentially living and teaching in a foreign, albeit hospitable, country.

To its credit, the LaSalle, like the indubitably American Juilliard Quartet—but unlike such stars of the chamber music world as the Amadeus Quartet in England, the Quartetto Italiano in Italy, and the Cleveland Quartet here—has never been content in its recordings to mine the known riches of the nineteenth-century repertory. Though the LaSalle has successfully recorded the late Beethoven quartets, in addition to Schubert and Brahms, it is best known for its discs of twentieth-century works going well beyond the standard Debussy and Ravel masterpieces. Its members have made a specialty of the music of the Second Viennese School—Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton von Webern. And they have expanded the definition of that movement to include the four quartets (1896, 1913-14, 1924, and 1936) of Schoenberg's only regular teacher, Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942), and the quartets (1935 and 1956) of Schoenberg's student Hans Erich Apostel (1901-1972).[1] Even more adventuresome, though perhaps less rewarding, have been the LaSalle's recordings of quartets by such certified avant-gardists as the American John Cage, and the Hungarian György Ligeti.

Sad to say, the LaSalle Quartet seems not to have a very large following in New York City. It has not been a regular visitor to either the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium of the Metropolitan Museum of Art or to

1 The LaSalle Quartet recordings of the Zemlinsky and the Apostel works, examples of fascinating and beautiful music that one has almost no chance to hear in concert, are currently available on Deutsche Grammophon 2741016.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center, and its concerts have not been frequently broadcast on the local radio stations which cater to serious music listeners. So it was both a welcome and a surprising treat to be able to hear the LaSalle in the middle of February as a special offering of the "Chamber Music at the Y" series at the Kaufmann Concert Hall of the 92nd Street YM-YWHA.

The LaSalle program, though short, was interesting and worthwhile. It began with an "Introduction and Fugue" in E-flat major, bearing the combined authorship of Johann Sebastian Bach and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. This curiosity, probably performed for the first time in New York at this concert, consists of an introduction written by Mozart followed by his own transcription of the four-voice E-flat major Fugue from Book II of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The Mozart/Bach-Mozart was followed by the String Quartet No. 3 (1923) of the great pianist Artur Schnabel (1882-1951). After the intermission, the concert resumed with two more Mozart/Bach-Mozart Introductions and Fugues, the fugues this time being in E major and D major, again from Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Then came a fascinating Rondo (1906) by Webern. Like the Mozart/Bach-Mozart pieces, it has been newly discovered. The concert concluded with the monumental, and monumentally demanding, Beethoven *Grosse Fuge*, opus 133.

The opening Mozart/Bach-Mozart Introduction and Fugue sounded more dutifully than enthusiastically played. The LaSalle's tone is not usually large, though on occasion they can play out in a fully satisfying way. In the Introduction to the E-flat major Fugue, Mozart seems almost to have been cowed by the contrapuntal force of the Bach work which shortly follows; the result is an uneasy compromise between Mozart's own melodic style and his desire to support that style with some counterpoint. After this kind of introduction, the actual Bach fugue, in Mozart's string transcription, seemed drained of rhythmic vitality, an outcome surely helped along by the LaSalle's somewhat shapeless execution. And yet one could only be grateful for this opportunity to hear one supremely great composer accommodate himself to the work of another immortal master. For an audience that doesn't mind being given a lesson in solid musical values—and the LaSalle's listeners clearly constitute such an audience—the experience could only have been enlightening.

The evening's real business started with the almost completely unknown Schnabel quartet. Indeed, so buried is Schnabel's music in general, notwithstanding his fame as a pianist, that the long and adulatory article about him in *The New Grove* by William Glock has almost nothing to say about his music. It does not even list his compositions. The Quartet No. 3, a long, dense, forty-minute work (in one movement), is an example of Schnabel's affection for the serial harmonic procedures and the characteristic emotional atmosphere of Schoenberg. Throughout, the quartet alternates passages of strident dissonance with moments of almost overpowering—and harmonically conventional—melodic sweetness. As moving as these melodic moments are, however, their juxtaposition with so much dissonance suggests that Schnabel had not yet found a consistent style—that is, a style in which an integrated harmonic vocabulary allows (as Schoenberg had shown even in his First String Quartet of 1904-05) each vertical and horizontal combination to be in some sense different, and yet at the same time the recognizable product of the same pen.

Despite the weaknesses of the Schnabel work—which were hardly mitigated in the LaSalle's strained and uncomfortable performance—it is clearly the writing of a major compositional talent. Inadvertently, it also suggests the major loss that has been suffered by the musical life of the past half century through the separation of music performance from composition. Even Schnabel seems to have had no interest in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

writing music for himself to perform.[2] And with today's performers the phenomenon is complete. Our greatest instrumentalists and conductors, with hardly an exception, no longer compose. Even more important, the best young performers today are not even trained to compose. Thus, they are deprived of inside knowledge of how music is made, and composition itself is deprived of the work of the most gifted musicians to come out of our music schools.

I am a bit chagrined to say that after the interest of the Schnabel quartet, the two Mozart/Bach-Mozart Introductions and Fugues which came after the intermission seemed even less beguiling than had the Introduction and Fugue at the beginning of the program. But matters picked up quickly with the Webern Rondo, an early work similar in its chromatic harmonic palette to the yearning and sensual Berg Piano Sonata (1908) written two years later. Like the Berg, the Webern Rondo was written while its composer was a student in Schoenberg's class. The autograph score was not found until 1965, and it has now been published by Carl Fischer in New York. The Rondo is an extraordinary work, reasonably long (for Webern) and full of melodic and harmonic genius. What the Rondo lacks in the driving force of Schoenberg's early quartet writing, or in the rotten-ripe atmosphere of early Berg, it fully makes up for in the lightness and sustained sweetness of its texture. It must be said, too, that the Rondo called forth from the LaSalle quite their best playing of the evening, playing that was rich, confident, and altogether masterly.

It is tempting to judge the LaSalle's performance of the Beethoven *Grosse Fugue,* the closing work of the evening, in terms of past recorded performances, among them the superlative performance by the Hollywood String Quartet in the 1950s. But concerts are not horse races, and the artistic outcome of the whole is not always determined by the perfection of the parts. The *Grosse Fugue* is perhaps the most demanding classical work written for string quartet, and in the concert it came after the long Schnabel and the short Webern, two works almost as demanding. While some of the LaSalle playing in the Beethoven was labored, so has been every live performance of the piece I have ever heard. What counted was the splendid seriousness of the LaSalle approach to this great music, and the fact that in concluding their playing with so difficult a work the LaSalle managed to give an entire concert of the highest intellectual and musical interest without making one concession to the audience. Clearly, there was a serious audience present at the 92nd Street Y to hear this concert, and it owed a debt of gratitude to the LaSalle Quartet. We were all the better for their musicianship, their initiative, and their courage. May they return soon.

It will probably not have escaped the diligent reader's attention that there is in fact one distinguished performer today who does compose at a level of ambition consistent with the celebrity of his performing career. This rare bird is, of course, Pierre Boulez (born 1925), the distinguished French composer and conductor who is by all odds the most important creative musician his country has produced since Poulenc and Messiaen. Boulez has recently been making a performing tour of the United States, his first since his departure from the New York Philharmonic in 1977. He has been conducting American orchestras as well as the Ensemble InterContemporain, his group from IRCAM (Institut de Récherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique), the

2 The only Schnabel work listed now in the Schwann catalogue is the *Duodecimet* (1950), a piece for chamber ensemble; it is available, in a performance by Leon Fleisher with the New England Conservatory Ensemble, on Audiofon 2017. The *Duodecimet,* performed by an ensemble under Jacques Monod, was available for many years coupled with the rather more romantic and juicy String Trio (1925), played by the excellent Gailimir Trio, on Columbia ML (later CML) 5447. The Schnabel Quartet No. 3, by the way, is to be recorded by the LaSalle later this year for Deutsche Grammophon.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

new music component of the Beaubourg project in Paris.

Boulez and his ensemble came into New York at the beginning of March to the accompaniment of much printed material—and even giant cloth banners at Lincoln Center—emblazoned "Boulez is Back!" The schedule of Boulez and Boulez-associated events included three concerts of the Ensemble InterContemporain conductd by Boulez; one set of Philharmonic subscription concerts conducted by Zubin Mehta and containing Boulez's important work *Rituel* (in addition to works of Mozart); another set of Philharmonic concerts conducted by Boulez and containing works by Stravinsky and Debussy in addition to his own *Improvisations sur Mallarmé I, II, & III*; a concert performed by ensembles from the Philharmonic, with the Suite from Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* conducted by Boulez; and finally a public conversation with Boulez at Symphony Space, an old movie theater on upper Broadway now used for avant-garde and "innovative" musical presentations.

This flurry of activity seemed altogether a belated making of amends to Boulez, whose six-year tenure with the Philharmonic has increasingly bulked larger—and better—in the memories of New York music-lovers. Just what went wrong during Boulez's leadership of the Philharmonic remains slightly unclear even now. At the time there was a widespread impression that the orchestra's subscriptions weren't selling; certainly there was vastly less interest in the records made by the orchestra with Boulez than there had been in those made by his predecessor, Leonard Bernstein. The audience which did find its way to the concerts—and it must be remembered that much of the time Boulez was at the Philharmonic he conducted in Philharmonic Hall, the earlier and even more acoustically unsatisfactory state of what is now called Fisher Hall—seemed unsympathetic to Boulez's readings of familiar repertory and to his choice of difficult new music. Though he did conduct the music of quite a few Americans, Boulez seemed deeply out of touch with the earlier nativist music which to this day marks America's proudest achievement in composition. Perhaps as a result of all these factors, Boulez evidently didn't want to spend very much time in New York when he wasn't actually performing. And one unhappy outcome seems even more important than all the foregoing: Boulez the composer at no time seemed to make a favorable impression on the orchestra, the audience, or on New York critical opinion.

There were, however, positive features of Boulez's activity at the Philharmonic. The New York audience received a conspectus of the most important new music being written, as well as of some parts of the nineteenth-century repertory usually ignored by celebrity music directors. The audience itself began to change; it came to include some younger elements, perhaps more willing than their elders to have artistic risks taken on their behalf. As for the orchestra, despite the coarsening of tone attendant on playing so much new music, so much unfamiliar old music, and so much familiar old music in unfamiliar conceptions, the Philharmonic learned new standards of playing together and in tune. Above all, unlike the situation today after eight seasons of Mehta, there was no doubt while Boulez was running the Philharmonic that someone was musically and intellectually in charge, and that what went on in Philharmonic concerts was worthy of respect and honor even when it seemed uninviting and, on occasion, actually ugly.

It was most assuredly the positive, not the negative, features of Boulez's achievement which seemed uppermost as the capacity audience assembled at the Columbia University gymnasium on the evening of March 5 to hear the first Boulez event, a concert by the Ensemble InterContemporain. The idea of seeing Boulez conduct seemed like a throwback to the past. The crowd on hand was an uneasy mixture of music-business notables, avant-garde composers and artists and their groupies, and just plain music lovers come to have their ears and minds stimu-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lated. It was a fascinating combination, of a kind one never sees anymore at New York Philharmonic concerts.

Musical-world gossip has it that Boulez turned down the nearby Cathedral of St. John the Divine because of its boomy acoustics in favor of the surprisingly clear-sounding Columbia gymnasium. In any case, the sound heard by the audience, seated on the playing floor, was produced not just by the ambient acoustics of the gymnasium but also by the loudspeakers hung from the ceiling and posted at the corners of the room.

The loudspeakers were in their way the stars—certainly they were the loudest performers—of the evening. The short program contained only two works, *Dialogue de l'Ombre Double* ("Dialogue of the Double Shadow") and *Répons* ("Response"). Although very different from each other, both works were as much creatures of late twentieth-century electronic technology as of their composer's undoubtedly fertile mind.

Dialogue de l'Ombre Double—the title is drawn from Paul Claudel's drama *Le Soulier de satin (The Satin Slipper)*—was written in 1985 for the composer Luciano Berio's sixtieth birthday. It is a seventeen-minute piece for a solo clarinettist, playing both live (but amplified) from the stage and on a pre-recorded tape. The work alternates between its pre-recorded and live sections; the room lights, including spotlights focused on the stage, are turned off for the pre-recorded sections, on for the live.

The musical material of *Dialogue* comprises improvisatory gestures made up of leaping passages utilizing the full range of the clarinet, and tremolos between intervals of varying sizes. Some relief from the thinness of the monodic musical line is provided by the clarinettist when he begins to play live before his pre-recorded double has quite finished; rather more relief is provided by the use of computer-generated procedures to pick out and lengthen individual notes and their overtone components.

The musical effect of all this legerdemain was, at least on this listener, meager. What sounds very much like clarinet improvisation —especially when the instrument is played in as refined a manner as it was here by Alain Damiens—is not unpleasant at all. But more is required to sustain interest over a quarter-hour than a clarinet playing in conversation with itself. At its best, Boulez's *Dialogue* seemed to partake of the atmosphere of French impressionist music, most notably the opening of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune* (1894), and *Syrinx* (1913) for solo flute. But Debussy's works seem pointed and never too long, and *Dialogue,* alas, went on and on.

It cannot be denied, however, that what the composer did not supply in *Dialogue* by way of music was supplied by technology. The live clarinet, amplified though it was, sounded remarkably lifelike; the taped clarinet, though clearly recorded in a different acoustic, still sounded real. The exciting passage of the taped sounds from speaker to speaker around the gymnasium evoked nostalgic memories of demonstrations of quadraphonic sound—even, three decades ago, of early stereo. But the sounds at the Columbia gymnasium were so full-bodied and so distortion-free that one could appreciate the technology for the thrilling scientific and engineering miracle it is.

Répons, forty-five minutes long, was conducted by Boulez. From the first measures it was clear that it is compositionally a weightier piece by far than *Dialogue.* The program notes for the Columbia concert described in admirably succinct terms the work's scoring and the instrumental set-up:

> *Répons* is conceived on two distinct but intercommunicating planes. Seated in the middle of the auditorium is a chamber orchestra . . . : nine woodwinds, seven brass and eight strings, all treated as soloists, all allowed to make their music without electronic intervention. Then, positioned around the audience there are six players who each have a principal instrument and some adjunct: a pianist with a celesta, another pianist with an electric organ, a harpist with two harps differently tuned, and performers on cymbalon (the large trapezoidal Hungarian dulcimer on legs), vibraphone and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CY TWOMBLY

Major Paintings 1955–1969

April 12–May 7

HIRSCHL & ADLER Modern

851 Madison Avenue New York, New York 10021 212 744-6700

xylophone, each with percussion. These six soloists also have tape recorders carrying "background" music, and their instrumental playing is fed via microphones to the electronic equipment for amplification, transformation and diffusion around the hall.

And so it was at Columbia, except that there seemed to be only one harp. It was soon clear that *Répons* is also technologically more imposing than *Dialogue*. Its sophisticated electronic equipment, which was not visible from where I sat, was also described in the program notes:

> . . . the essential equipment consists of the 4X machine developed at IRCAM by Giuseppe de Giugno, and the halaphone invented by Hans Peter Haller in the studios of Southwest German Radio . . . . The system is able to alter the timbre of any sound before sending it on to the loudspeakers; it can also store an event and perhaps repeat it several times with programmed changes of pitch. Therefore, the electronic element is not merely passive, accepting and transmitting what the instrumentalists produce; rather, it has an active role in the music's unfolding, and the computer technicians are "performers" of *Répons* quite as much as are the players of the more usual instruments.

With the first blocks of dissonantal chords that came from the chamber orchestra it was clear that Boulez as conductor was exerting a magisterial presence over the performance. As the instruments from around the hall were heard, adding to the heavy impasto of sound, Boulez seemed to dominate everything, presiding over what seemed like infinite separate planes of sound with spare, sharp, and decisive motions. When he gave cues, the response from the musicians was immediate and precise; he seemed a master of even the wild passages emanating from the two pianos as they played their cavorting figurations. Like his conductorial manner, the sound was rhythmically alive, hard-edged, at least superficially expressionless, and often brutal.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

So triumphant was Boulez's conducting that even the brilliant technology was thrown into the shade. I wish I could report that the triumph was not just that of Boulez the conductor but also that of Boulez the composer. But once again, as in *Dialogue,* it seemed that the musical material was mostly gesture and manner, and therefore essentially trivial. One can only admire Boulez's skill in creating sounds which over a long period of time seem stylistically consistent and integrated. He surely has passed the test of finding his own style—the test which, as I mentioned in connection with the LaSalle Quartet concert, Artur Schnabel failed.

But there is more in music composition than finding a consistent style. There is the absolute necessity of giving the listener in some way the impression that he is hearing what for want of a better term must be called *music*—sound that through some miracle becomes euphony. Boulez's blocks of dissonances, even when, as in *Répons,* they verge on lush, Messiaen-like harmonies, seem all too rarely to break through the noise barrier. It is not that his dissonances are extreme; and it is not that he uses more of them than, for example, the American composer Elliott Carter. But familiarity with Boulez's materials does not, contrary to the case with Carter, render them musical. Whether because of the pitch intervals he uses, the density of their occurrence, the registers in which they are employed, the particular instrumental timbres for which he writes, or the attacks he asks his musicians to use, his dissonances do not seem to live, and his music does not seem to live either—as music.

But the music—or something—does live in Boulez's own performance of it. Perhaps what Pierre Boulez presented on this night at the Columbia University gymnasium cannot be adequately described as music composition, any more than what he did can be adequately described as mere conducting. Perhaps the combination can only be described by that much-abused term, performance art. If such is the case, this was for once performance art done by an artist in full intellectual command of the most sophisticated musical techniques. Whatever one chooses to call it, by once again demonstrating the power of the performer as composer Pierre Boulez was the cause of what must surely be one of the most important events to have taken place in New York City musical life for many years.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

Winter notebook

by Jed Perl

Abstraction. If you walk north from SoHo toward the East Village, you may come upon the John Good Gallery, an immaculate white space tucked away on Great Jones Street amidst the pleasantly run-down factory buildings. In January, Good presented a show called "Recent Abstract Painting," and hung works by two artists who have major reputations (Jasper Johns and Howard Hodgkin) alongside works by artists in middle career (Gary Stephan and George Negroponte) and some youngsters (among them Christopher Lucas and Moira Dryer). This was a thesis show: the pieces were cannily chosen, and together they had the look of an argument well framed.

The wall on which the gallery hung Jasper Johns's thirty-inch-high black-and-white *Untitled* (1980) between two small, brilliantly red and orange paintings by Howard Hodgkin presented abstraction as a genre with a sense of history. In the case of the Johns, the history is largely of the artist's own making. The Johns abstraction—an all-over pattern made up of packed-together, roughly hexagonal striped areas—marks a stop-off on the artist's retreat from Pop. It points us to the moment about a decade ago when this most elegant of all Pop artists decided to remake himself into a classical modernist. The beautifully brushed but impassive surface is a kind of art-historical Rorschach test for viewers—you can imagine it as anything. This pattern could point us toward Roman mosaics, European geometric abstraction—or it might just be a kitchen floor, the persistence of some banal Pop memory. The Johns painting is a Zen conundrum—a brilliantly suave maneuver, and altogether random. Johns could add a foot or two in any direction and not alter the painting one whit. The smallish size gives to this abstraction the prettily miniaturized look so popular in these times of shrinking aesthetic expectations.

If for Johns the past is autobiography, for Howard Hodgkin it's an image seen through the wrong end of the telescope. Hodgkin's paintings make us think of Turner, Seurat, Vuillard, and Bonnard; from his vantage point these artists begin to look like teeny-weeny talents, each one just a smidgen of perfect sensibility. Hodgkin likes to put his little oils in painted frames which recall Seurat's, but in comparison to the master pointillist's tiny, dissonant strokes of blue and orange, or purple and green, Hodgkin's splatters of color feel woozy, waterlogged. Hodgkin's *Passion,* with its great smudge of orange, resembles a late Turner watercolor with all the figurative and philosophic underpinnings removed. *Lit de Mariage* is somewhat more of a success. The dark heart set in the midst of a bed of pinkish reds, soft as eiderdown, is a whisper of a poetic idea. Hodgkin's paintings are born of a passion for the grandeur of oil paint; they're acts of preservation, little life rafts of beauty to carry us through the contemporary flood. The John Good Gallery is offer-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing these, along with the Johns, as the ticket back to sanity. In a press release the gallery explains that "the artists in this exhibition share an approach to painting that is both serious and sensual without being self-indulgent." We're being guided toward the utopia of pure painting in a show full of dreamers. The ambitions are just fine, but the more you linger with the paintings, the more you feel that the dreamers can't make good on their dreams.

Gary Stephan and George Negroponte weigh in with a view of the past that's ankle-deep. They've discovered tradition, and it stretches way, way back—as far as a generation or even two. Negroponte's eight-foot-high *Brothers* is neo-Abstract Expressionism, a big swirly amorphous mass of Kleenex-box blues and mauves. Gary Stephan's *Serving Two Masters* (probably the most creditable painting of his I've ever seen) is a spiral of rounded forms in the artist's characteristic mix of gray, white, and orange. If it were two-and-a-half-feet square rather than four-and-a-half-feet square it might pass as a third-rate geometric painting of the 1930s. A decade ago the Stephan would have been called academic; now it's retro-chic, and shown at Mary Boone.

Two of the younger artists here are a bit more engaging—they're like graduate students whose work catches your eye. Moira Dryer is operating somewhere between Barnett Newman and early Ellsworth Kelly. In *Portrait of Francesca and Paquita,* she has divided two horizontal rectangles of wood into four triangles of black and white. In *Untitled,* she fills another horizontal surface with a few dark, moiré-patterned rectangular areas. She seems to have a feeling for intervals, and for telling juxtapositions of forms. Christopher Lucas, the most engaging of the younger artists at Good, has probably taken a close look at the rough, informal surfaces of early Abstract Expressionist painting. I've seen some pictures by Lucas in which browns and blacks have the gritty yet mystical aura of the New York School around 1950, when the artists were contributing to little magazines such as *Possibilities* and *Tiger's Eye.* Lucas's typical image, made up of many overlapping, loosely painted rectangular shapes, is based, I expect, on the work Ad Reinhardt was doing at that time. In some of Lucas's pictures these rectangles converge into a form of a vaguely citylike or planetlike appearance. Other times they cover the surface almost at random. I was interested to see, in a recent painting called *Ice Cream Captain,* that Lucas has been moving into a broader color range. This horizontal painting (5′3″ x 3′7″) has a large, vague, diamond shape sitting in the midst of a haze of small, softly brushed rectangles. The blue-green-into-purple color (with some touches of yellow) is wishy-washy, but has possibilities. From the dozen or so Lucases I've seen so far, his work is a bit all over the place. He has a penchant for oddly shaped paintings and unconventional supports (like scrap wood), and this gives the pictures a certain air of mystery. The found-object routine, though, is something Lucas ought to be careful about: the more the paintings look like curiosities, the harder it is to take them seriously as illusions made with paint.

"Recent Abstract Painting" tells us where a certain element of the art scene is now. The ambitions are admirable, and yet there's a dimness to even the best work here, a sense of strangely lowered horizons. I have the feeling some of the artists at John Good really do love the great abstract painting of the past; I also have the feeling they're more than a bit lost. These artists live in a fashionable art scene that's been running on hot air for so long that they may never be able to get back to first principles. At the John Good Gallery, I felt as if I was standing in a gallery in the greatest provincial art capital in the world. And this is the only art capital left.

Cigarettes. Sometimes the experience of a gallerygoer reminds me of the predicament of the heroine of the 1948 movie *The Snake Pit,* in which Olivia de Havilland plays a young woman wrongly incarcerated in a mental hospital. Her protestations only convince the doctors that she really is crazy, and the more she protests, the crazier they think

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she is. De Havilland becomes increasingly violent and irrational, until the officials consign her to the worst ward of the hospital—a sort of Hollywood precursor to the freak house in Peter Brook's *Marat/Sade,* which is called the snake pit.

One day in January the snake pit of the art world turned out to be the back room at Gracie Mansion Gallery. Al Hansen was exhibiting a three-dimensional female torso made out of cigarette butts, as well as wall reliefs, also made of butts. Hansen's show was called "In Search of the Goddess," and the central cigarette-butt statue was mounted on a pedestal and flanked by various little votive offerings which gave it the look of a run-down religious shrine. Hansen has composed a love poem to the goddess of garbage and carcinogens—this is a goddess you want to squish under your foot. It's a wildly demented idea, and Hansen goes straight down into the gutter with it. He's possibly the first artist to show us what several cubic feet of glued-together cigarette butts actually look like. They're dirty, spongy, and nasty in every way.

Currents. Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art is a handsome, multi-floored exhibition space in a renovated red-brick building just around the corner from Newbury Street, where many of Boston's commercial art galleries are located. ICA, like many of our contemporary museums, is a kind of clearing-house for new work: its exhibition schedule includes group shows of Boston artists, as well as shows from New York and elsewhere. "Currents" is the name ICA gives to an ongoing series which focuses on half a dozen artists at a time.

In January, when I was up in Boston, "Currents" presented six men: a sculptor, Eric Bainbridge; two photographers, Elliot Schwartz and Lothar Baumgarten; and three painters, Ross Bleckner and Trevor Winkfield (who both show in New York) and David Carbone (a thirty-six-year-old Boston artist). There was no particular theme given to this grouping, but one felt a certain taste for work that didn't quite fit into any normal category. The photographs by Elliot Schwartz of (among other things) shrunken heads and factory machinery have a disturbed, fantastical air; Bainbridge's sculptures of Surrealist animals covered in fake fur exist in some queer netherworld between the real and the abstract. Trevor Winkfield does high-art day-glo-colored cartoons that will mix, say, the little boy and girl figures from the Droste cocoa box and a mechanical man with a Priapus-sized penis. The oil paintings take us from the abstract with representational elements (Ross Bleckner) to the representational with abstract structures (David Carbone).

Bleckner's darkly lit abstractions, which were featured in the main exhibition space with Bainbridge's sculpture, were a neat choice for "Currents," because Bleckner appears to be stacking up as the artist who defines high style, circa 1986. (Gary Indiana, the art critic for *The Village Voice,* recently said Bleckner's funereal abstractions are meditations on the AIDS epidemic —though I don't know how one could infer this directly from the paintings.) Bleckner's pictures start the audience on a guessing game: one can take bets on how much more of a representational painter he means to become. The paintings at ICA resemble a blackish night seen through a drizzle of whitish paint: Bleckner does out-of-focus black-and-white reproductions of the world of Gustave Moreau. In the paintings he showed at Mary Boone in New York in February, the forms become clearer—and one sees wrought-iron gates, metal trophies, and points of brightness reminiscent of headlights coming at us along a nighttime road. Bleckner's new canvases look like the concoctions of some curiously demented Sunday painter.They're the sorts of things I'd expect to stumble on in a junk shop, and I imagine I'd stare at them for a minute or two wondering who did them and for what reason. At the Mary Boone Gallery these Ross Bleckners, hung far apart, are made to look like symbols, and they're received with murmurs of praise by an age that doesn't know what symbols are.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David Carbone's paintings, which were the most engaging works in "Currents," take for their subject the performers of the circus and the sideshow: the knife swallowers, magicians, snake handlers, and puppeteers. Carbone's work is as bizarre as anything in the "Currents" show, and for once the bizarreness feels connected to a discerning, wide-ranging sensibility. Circus and music-hall performers are a beloved subject of modern art (we see them in Seurat, Lautrec, Degas, and Picasso), but Carbone, who paints people in a meticulously detailed, rather old-fashioned way, doesn't seem interested in the melancholy private life of the performer which so often engaged the early modern artists. He also doesn't share Degas's and Seurat's interest in the relation between the performers and the audience. In Carbone's paintings the performers are onstage—and the stage is all we see. The space in these paintings is shallow: a narrow ledge of floor and a back wall, frequently hung with a circus poster. The elements in Carbone's pictures make for some rather bizarre, sadistically and masochistically tinged scenarios: there are Houdini-like magician figures in chains or locked in boxes, and ladies playing with snakes and swords. This is the stuff of a multi-layered, sexualized contemporary vision, and Carbone, who obviously owes an immense debt to Balthus, bring his phantasms to life by realizing everything in a tightly realistic manner. Like Balthus, he wants to latch onto the Great Classical Tradition and take it around a hairpin turn—the suspense rests in whether he'll pull it off, or just end up as a claustrophobically academic painter. These paintings—in which we see a fragment of a campy circus poster or a ladder rising all the way up the surface like the zip in a Barnett Newman—might have resulted if a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century master had come back in a time machine to do copies of stills from avant-garde movies by Godard or Fellini.

Carbone's best work at ICA is to be seen in three recent paintings, each between five-and-a-half- and six-feet high and focused on one large figure. In these paintings we see performers locked in confrontation with the tools of their trade. The female snake handler is a tough, slightly gnomic little nut of a lady who eyes her snake with the look of an Eve who will never lose the upper hand again. The boy puppet master is a dreamy-eyed cupid of a kid who nuzzles up to the grizzled face of his old-man puppet: the child is father of the man. In *Man in a Glass Box* the escape artist, a handsome young man in T-shirt and shorts, looks out at us dispassionately from his temporary see-through prison. There's a great deal of color in these paintings—walls of rich deep green, clothes of shimmering lemon-yellow and powdery blue—which Carbone pulls together through the use of traditional techniques of glazing and scumbling. Carbone demonstrates an amazingly fluid control of representational conventions. He can make a figure stand securely on the floor; he gets the details of hands and fingers and facial features to flow into the whole; and he knows how to work large simple areas of color against the tight articulation of little forms in order to maintain an overall sense of light and air. Carbone has a taste for the kind of sharply focused details we know from the seventeenth-and eighteenth-century masters. Minor elements—like the woman's little high-heeled boots—are worked up with marvelous finesse. Carbone also has the wit to contrast modeled forms with broad areas of flat painting, as in *A Boy Puppet Master,* where the magnificently sculptural figure of the boy is juxtaposed with the flattened shape of a hermaphrodite in a poster hanging on the wall. At the edges of each of these three canvases Carbone has painted a flat, poster-like border as if to proclaim, "This is all an illusion."

Carbone's two memorable images are of young men, and I would imagine there is involved here a sense of identification between the artist and his subjects. In the enigmatic look Carbone's sweet-featured boy puppet master gives his puppet, you feel the romantic self-sufficiency of youth. This

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

boy's whole figure has the dreamy tranquility of one of Pierre-Paul Prud'hon's early nineteenth-century figures. An air of mysterious contentment pervades every part of the lad's body, all the way through the casual contrapposto of his legs and down to the confident set of his feet in ballet slippers. *A Boy Puppet Master* is a fantasy of sweet youth triumphing over the spector of the father: the fierce old man is reduced to puppet size.

In *Man in a Glass Box* youth isn't any longer so dewy sweet. The boy is now a young adult with sensual lips, intelligent, arched eyebrows and a lean, muscular body shown to nice advantage by his yellow shirt and shorts. He's trapped—sitting, his legs bent up—in a glass box, yet he seems imperturbable. One hand is draped casually over a knee in a gesture clearly borrowed from the indolent nude youths of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling. It's a riveting image masterfully painted, and Carbone seems for once to have eased up on the rigid frontality of his compositions and given the picture (if not its hero!) some extra space to breathe. The foreground is empty, and the box is shoved deep into the space at an angle—which brings us to the second figure in the painting. On the back wall, behind and above the box, is painted the image of another young man, and he's the opposite of the man in the box. This figure—done in broad, unmodeled areas like an illustration in a children's book—is an immensely overweight joke of a guy. Decked out in a baby-blue and yellow suit with white ruffled cuffs and collar, he's a comic figure out of Hogarth. He's blown up like a balloon, and he raises his arms and looks beatifically heavenward, as if prepared to fly away. The painting is about opposites: the handsome, lean, intelligent, fully modeled *real* young man is imprisoned, while the ridiculously overweight, silly *painted* young man takes off for the stars. The idea here is really very simple—it may come down to Cyril Connelly's remark that "Imprisoned in every fat man a thin one is wildly signalling to be let out"—but it's realized with a special fullness, and it feels strange and compelling and new. The painting is an allegory about flat and modeled form and their various possibilities for expressing beauty. *Man in a Glass Box* may be the confession of a twentieth-century artist caught—trapped?—in a love affair with traditional painting. It's one of the very few images I've seen this season which has struck me as altogether original.

Polemic. In December, Collins and Milazzo, a curatorial team with a big reputation in East Village art circles, mounted a show at Tibor de Nagy called "Cult and Decorum." Most of the art in this show, both figurative and abstract, could be described as iconic: the key image was probably Sarah Charlesworth's photographic *Buddha,* in which against a black ground there floated a stone buddha and a large three-leaf clover. In "Cult and Decorum" there was a still life with bananas by Peter Nadin, an assemblage of two basketballs floating in a fish tank by Jeff Koons, a U-shaped sculpture by Gary Stephan, and a big red abstraction, with two twisted stripes—one black, one white—running up and down, by Philip Taaffe. "Cult and Decorum" wasn't a fun show to look at, but that wasn't the point. This was a think-show, and the art really functioned as a series of footnotes to the text which Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo had mounted on the wall as you came into the gallery.

Collins and Milazzo are at the pulse-point of the East Village, where the aestheticism of Oscar Wilde and the French artists who gathered around Mallarmé is being revised in some very odd ways. Collins and Milazzo might be said to stand for aestheticism without beauty; they lounge about under the banner of anti-art for anti-art's sake. They're postmodern, but unlike the *October* magazine crowd, they're also post-political. Collins and Milazzo are post-post: they've created an aesthetic for those who are beyond everything.

Collins and Milazzo's one-page polemic is written in a hash of leftish political buzz words, Frenchy lit. crit., and postmodern art jargon which might sound amusing if it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

weren't so ineptly put together. According to Collins and Milazzo, "decorum has . . . become a cult-phenomenon within the Social. We may reference this social trope to Postmodernism, or to something like the changing of the guards of the hypothetical." I find it hard to know if the awkward mix of everyday figures of speech and high-toned jargon is intentional or not. You read this the way you read a foreign language only half understood, with of course the difference that Collins and Milazzo are writing in a language which doesn't exist. For them, the art gallery "no longer functions 'merely' as a substantial support-structure." The gallery now "generates a system of appreciation, an inordinate configuration of ephemeral factors, which, in fact, actually guide the 'nature' of the object itself." Note the bland acceptance here—the stoned-out submission to anything that is. The appreciation of the object, they continue, in some cases "actually exceeds the object itself." The object exists "primarily to claim the sensibility of the viewer." The object "must leave the subjectivity of the viewer in tact [sic]. In effect, the object functions merely as a backdrop for this appreciation: it provides the decor for the sensibility of the viewer."

I wonder how the artists feel about this last statement. David Diao, represented at "Cult and Decorum" by an abstraction of gold rectangles floating in a sea of gray, was regarded the last time I looked as a straightforward abstract painter. But the artists here are clearly caught in something bigger than they are. Collins and Milazzo go farther and farther. "[T]he object manages to construct a trope which undermines the claims of appreciation." And then we're onto "the recultivation of Concept," the "conflation [very fashionable word] of abstraction and appropriation." Finally: "Look, recultivation, and conflation, here, speak strangely to the 'radical' nature of decorum, and, ultimately, to the objectification of the trope."

Are Collins and Milazzo putting one over on us? I wouldn't be surprised if there's a conscious element of screwball comedy mixed into all this: when academic postmodernism meets the East Village clubs you get the deconstruction cocktail. This polemic has the sole virtue of clarifying for those antediluvians among us who still expect to be moved by works of art exactly what we're up against. The cultivation of sensibility is a fine thing: I find ample opportunity to cultivate mine in the privacy of my own apartment or while I'm out walking the streets. In a gallery I'm looking for something that slices through my sensibility. Collins and Milazzo and I don't have different tastes—we live on different planets.

Gold. The Jules Olitski show at André Emmerich in January was a veritable Fort Knox among art shows. Olitski is working with metallic-colored acrylic gels, and the thick paint, which is brushed and trowled and piled-up across the surface, takes on, in one painting or another, the color of gold, copper, brass, and tarnished silver. The surfaces are as full of peaks and valleys as a topographical map, and Olitski has underscored this three-dimensional effect by spraying the gel, after it sets, with dark pigment in such a way as to cast built-in shadows onto the sides of the mounds and canyons of gel. The metallic gel, which is often infused with hints of blue or purple or green, has an engrossing variety of tone, and the paint is handled in a great variety of ways. There are canvases built up out of a turbulent, choppy rhythm of broad curved strokes; in other pictures the gel streams across the surface. At edges, and occasionally in the midst of the metallic gleam, there are touches, dabs of pure color.

From up close, the surfaces are rather fascinating; but if you move four or six feet away, the eye begins to have considerable trouble making spatial distinctions among all this glittery modeled paint. From a distance one loses the sense of the surface as a made thing: the paintings look almost like giant color photographs which might represent the surface of some distant planet, or the magnification of half an inch of a silver tray. There's an admirable intensity to the way the very restricted medium is used;

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when you leave the show, you feel you've been through a magnificently controlled experience—too controlled, by far. Olitski, with his masterful way of making an interesting surface, is floating along on the tide of a great pictorial tradition; he's buoyed up by all the artists who have, in the past hundred years, stretched the elements of painting into an increasingly unified and singular expression. Olitski immerses himself totally in the surface of the canvas; his intimacy with paint feels narcissistic, self-absorbed. I don't feel any undertow in his work—there's nothing but acrylic gel to engage us. The closed-off, rather photographic look which the paintings take on from a distance isn't just an optical accident; Olitski is painting as if the modernist tradition were a circle that closes in on itself. He never leaves anything in his paintings for us to interact with in an immediate, personal way. Olitski wears the Great Tradition like a priestly garment of beaten gold. Viewers are invited to cry "Holy, holy"—but all I registered was a dazzling void.

Pots. A strong argument can be made that much recent art is better understood by reading downtown fashion magazines like *New York Talk* than by struggling through the long pieces in the regular art magazines. The watchword downtown is impact, and when the downtown mags take the trouble to write up an uptown show like Andrew Lord's at BlumHelman in January, they tell you why it's turning heads without bothering to go into the aesthetic rationalizations that still dog the traditional art press. Why go into complex explanations when the work has about as much intellectual weight as a leopard-skin pillbox hat?

Andrew Lord's show of matte black ceramic pitchers, coffee and tea pots, cups and saucers, and platters had that quality of instant chic. Arranged in groups on low pedestals, Lord's black ceramics (touched here and there with a drizzle of gold or the laying on of white fingerprints) were like the burnt offerings found in some ancient tomb. Lord is a wonderfully inventive potter. His shapes, which echo the forms of traditional Mediterranean folk ceramics and the cubistic and neoclassical designs done in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, are delightful to look at. Grouped together in sets of two or six or thirty-one pieces, the ceramics are absurdist tea and coffee and dinner sets, obviously not meant to be used. (Some of the lids on the cubistic jobs would slide off if they weren't glued.) During Lord's show, the BlumHelman Gallery was turned into a Platonic china shop, where dishes were sold as ideal forms.

People tend to comment on how Lord's arrangements recall the groupings in still-life paintings. People say, "That group looks like a Morandi"—or, if they're really sophisticated, like a late still life by André Derain. Each arrangement is a little *tableau vivant*—an imaginary still-life painting made into a real arrangement of non-utilitarian pots. The show may lead some viewers into meditations on the real and the unreal, but this line of thought won't yield anything more substantial than the mystical-chic familiar from all the recent super-serious discussions of fashion photography. Lord probably doesn't know if he's a sculptor, or a potter, or what. He paints it all black the way young men now wear black Levis and young women again wear little black dresses and everyone downtown dyes their hair black. Black is the color for those who lived through sensory overload and are too weary now to choose. Black sends out all the right signals: it stands for high fashion and for death—and it doesn't show dirt.

Sonnets. George Braziller has reprinted Picasso's *Gongora* (1948),[1] a collection of sonnets by the sixteenth-century Spanish poet famous for his proto-modernist obscurity. Picasso wrote out the poems on pages ornamented with borders of miscellaneous figures and motifs, and created a series of etched portrait heads, mostly of women. The Braziller reprint contains a

1 *Gongora* was published in 1985 by George Braziller; 176 pages, $50.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

genial introduction by John Russell, in which he recalls the happy impression Picasso's *Gongora* and other fine French illustrated books made on starved English eyes just after World War II. The *Gongora* reprint has been greeted with a mild hum of praise. Picasso has been dead for less than fifteen years, and the universal skepticism with which his later work used to be received in America has now turned to an equally unthinking admiration. I believe Picasso did have some miraculously fine years at the very end of his life—and there's much in the work of the 1950s and 1960s which I also admire—but to accept later Picasso wholesale is to become sentimental about an *oeuvre* that doesn't need the crutch of sentiment. *Gongora* is third-rate or fifth-rate Picasso; and the high-toned literary packaging shouldn't throw us off.

The series of women's heads in *Gongora* shows Picasso in one of the least flattering of his many guises—the neo-Matisse mode. A few of the heads, done in a stipply technique, are delicately, winsomely lovely—they're rococo throwaways. But the majority, in a plain yet ponderous line technique, are hollow in form and wooden in emotion. Picasso can't help doing fascinating things with a line—the way he locks an eyeball into a pair of eyelids is always enthralling—but these women are all from central casting. They're as interchangeable as the extras in a Fellini movie: Picasso goes in for those same Fellini-esque Mediterranean types, with features so stylized as to bring beauty to the brink of the grotesque. The sheets of calligraphy, done in a self-consciously sloppy style, I find even more disheartening. The French *livre d'artiste* is a peculiarly ungainly brand of book to begin with. Its size and weight are an affront to anyone who really reads, and if it's not lushly deluxe (like the Matisse *Jazz*) it has no reason to exist. Picasso's graffiti-calligraphy shows the maestro slumming amidst the splendors of French bookmaking. *Gongora* is the kind of show-offish performance that made the sophisticated public of a decade ago wonder if this genius's genius hadn't turned into a bit of a fraud.

Prints. The exhibition of prints by the forty-year-old artist Bill Jensen, currently at the Museum of Modern Art, is a honey of a show. Jensen—who paints small, dark, mysterious abstractions—has been doing prints since 1983, and this show, called "First Etchings," traces his development from some early, slightly awkward tries, to an easy, free-flowing mastery. Jensen experiments with the full range of intaglio printmaking techniques—etching, engraving, aquatint, roulette—and achieves a range of structures and images and kinds of space. He's an artist who's simply trying to realize his ideas. Sometimes he goes all the way, sometimes he doesn't quite make it, but you always know he's being straight with you. When I was at this show I felt relaxed and fully alive. After I'd been looking for a time at these very solid, often very beautiful prints by a contemporary artist I looked up and realized with almost a start that I was actually seeing them at the Museum of Modern Art. This is the first time in my memory that MOMA has devoted an exhibition to a contemporary artist whose work is really interesting. (I wonder if the unnecessary and rather distracting inclusion of cases full of preparatory studies and preliminary states wasn't an attempt to make Jensen's work look more fashionably "conceptual" and "process-oriented" than it really is.) I know I'm not the only person who muttered a little "Hallelujah" at seeing the Jensen show. Bill Jensen's work is something you can think about in terms of art rather than in terms of the art world.

The centerpiece of the Jensen show is *Endless,* a portfolio of eleven vertical seven-by-five-inch etchings which Jensen created at the Universal Limited Art Editions printshop in West Islip, New York, between 1983 and 1985. The series, which is shown in the sequence in which the images were completed, begins very strong, gets weak toward the middle, and ends with a return to strength. The first three serenely enigmatic etchings, all of centralized images, are as good as anything Jensen has done. Number one, called *Angel,* is composed of many tiny

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lines, each as thin and brittle as a bare twig in a winter landscape. The heart of *Angel* is a dense vertical slit of an orifice, from which sprout two different, overlapping families of forms: a delicately modeled group of peaks, and a spiral of lightly hatched lines. The image fades as it expands, so that by the time everything resolves into a slightly irregular vertical oval there's just a gasp of quivering lines left. The second etching, *Mute,* is a microcosm made of more solid stuff. Within another irregular oval form, now of somber gray, are poised three whitish sculptural objects: a central double teardrop (like an hourglass curved at top and bottom) flanked by two smaller shapes with the vaguely human look of shrouded figures. These two Arpish forms accompany the hourglass in a funereal, dirgelike procession. In the third plate, *Melville,* also basically oval in shape, the spiral and the hatching from *Angel* mix with the modeled teardrop form from *Mute. Melville,* with its heavily etched lines, is less dour than the first two; there's a whimsical lightness poking through. In these three plates we're in the midst of bewitching dream-constellations. The plates aren't composed end to end: the image is a mystery in the midst of uncharted astral seas. Jensen here achieves a perfect balance between image-making (which is his strong card) and composition in space (at which he isn't so self-assured).

The first three plates show Jensen in the slow-moving yet insistently centrifugal mode of his best paintings; the rest of *Endless* is, in relation to Jensen's earlier work, more frankly experimental, and this has its ups and its downs. In some of the later prints the images reach all the way to the edge of the plate and the space becomes deeper but on the whole rather less convincing. *Ribbons,* with its curving forms, is a nice idea, but the space, probably meant to be flowing and undulating, ends up rather amorphous. *Good Earth,* in which passages printed in brown ink are intermingled with the black, has forms so drippily vague as to recall Salvador Dali at his most unpleasantly abstract. If these two prints lack compelling imagery, *Pilgrim* (with its sea shell) and *Daniel* (with a form like a clenched fist) are images that don't activate the surface as a whole. Toward the end of the portfolio, Jensen seems to become more comfortable with some of his new, decentralized compositional ideas. *Lust* offers a delicately drawn, almost naturalistic rendering of the side of a planet from which stalactitelike protruberances push out into dark outer space. *Innocent* is a big, flat seaweed of a shape; and *Fearless,* the best of the deep-space compositions, sends dark spirals floating through a soft gray sky. These last three prints, while not confident in the way of the first three, point off in some intriguing directions. Jensen's art is changing, and this is reflected in the four color prints in the show, all of which suggest a move into increasingly complex compositional ideas. Among these I found the most to look at in *Plight.* This is a whirl of grayed yellows through which a great wedge full of light and curving forms breaks as if to illuminate the gloom.

The Modern has produced, to accompany the Jensen show, a handsome little catalogue which illustrates all of *Endless.* Deborah Wye, who wrote the introductory essay, describes Jensen as "an intensely private painter whose work is done in solitude," and who "was fearful at the thought of others being present while he worked." Wye is referring here to the natural trepidation many artists feel at working amidst the hustle and bustle of a printshop, and her comment stopped me for a minute, because I didn't imagine anyone thought it was especially unusual or noteworthy for a modern painter to prize his solitude. I understand that Wye is connecting Jensen's "solitude" with the hermetic quality of his images, and the connection isn't unfair. I expect that she is also thinking of Jensen too much in relation to all the young bucks who (if Calvin Tomkins in *The New Yorker* can be believed) have one or two studio assistants on hand—and even taking a hand in the painting—at all times.

Wye is hush-hush about Jensen's relation to all art, past and present; she wants to make Jensen appear *sui generis,* and so she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

doesn't mention a single other artist's name. This is a miscalculation, for Jensen's prints are too good to be regarded in a void. Hilton Kramer, both in his 1980 review in *The New York Times* and in his recent essay for *Art in Our Time,* the catalogue of the Saatchi Collection, has made the essential connections between Jensen and the mystical tradition in American art. Jensen's art—with its small scale, its queer intensity, its literary connotations—makes a significant increment in a tradition that stretches from Ryder to Hartley and O'Keeffe and Dove. (There's also, in Jensen's taste for solitary, singular forms, an echo of the oracular mysteries cultivated by Myron Stout.) Jensen's etchings evoke all these American associations. Probably because the sense of form here is less ponderous than in the oils, the prints also call up a fresh group of affinities to European art, and these make the range of Jensen's concerns seem ampler than heretofore. Redon, whom Jensen once mentioned in the title of a painting, comes to mind often at this show, as does, from time to time, Blake. The delicacy of Wols is here, as are memories of the prints of Miró (and of that half-European, Calder), and even, at times, of the line experiments of Hartung. Jensen seems more in tune than ever with the literary end of Surrealist art: especially with Max Ernst and André Masson. I don't know how many of these are conscious borrowings—it doesn't really matter. Bill Jensen inhabits a spacious landscape of pictorial concerns, obsessions, fantasies. At "First Etchings" we're in the hands of an artist who's in love with the medium and in love with the world of art. Jensen has said, "Only at U.L.A.E. could I have worked for two years on a 5 x 7" plate." To which we might add: how many other contemporary artists would want to? Bill Jensen is the real McCoy.

Masterpiece. Since Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* arrived in Washington in January for a four-month-long stay at the National Gallery, its presence in the United States has been building into a kind of underground sensation among artists and others who care about art. *The Flaying of Marsyas,* one of the very last paintings Titian worked on, hangs in the Archepiscopal Palace (now a state museum) in Kroměříz, in Czechoslovakia. Before it came to London for "The Genius of Venice 1500-1600" show in 1983, it was virtually unknown in the West. When the painting was in England, the painter and critic Lawrence Gowing wrote in the *London Review of Books* that "London has been half under the spell of this masterpiece, in which the tragic sense that overtook Titian's *poesie* in his seventies reached its cruel and solemn extreme. At most hours on most days there is a knot of visitors riveted and fairly perplexed in front of it." When people hear you've seen the Titian, they want to talk; everybody's exchanging impressions, scraps of information. When you get down to Washington and stand in front of this roughly seven-foot-square painting with its sultry, golden color you know the great German critic Walter Benjamin was wrong when he said that mechanical reproduction put an end to aura, and you know all the post-structuralists are wrong about the death of the original. You may leave the National Gallery feeling you're not quite capable of understanding all of what Titian was up to (some may think even he wasn't sure) but you know you've been in the presence of an irreducible original, and the aura is something you can feel.

The *Marsyas* is one of the half dozen paintings from somewhere near the very end of Titian's life (c. 1488-1576) and his technique here approaches anarchy. As with the *Nymph and Shepherd* in Vienna and the *Entombment* in Venice, the question of intent is complicated by questions of completeness, of the presence of the hand of followers, of restoration. In *The Flaying of Marsyas,* which is closely based on Ovid, we see the pipe-playing goat-man after he has lost his competition with Apollo to determine who's the greatest musician. Marsyas's punishment in defeat is to be skinned alive, and in Titian's version we see Marsyas hung upside-down from a tree, at the center of the canvas, while one figure tears at his flesh

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with a knife, another figure plays a violin, Midas (the judge of the competition) sits deep in thought, and a dog laps at the poor goat-man's blood. *Marsyas* is painted in a peculiarly casual way, as if Titian were just playing it by ear. This late Titian has the easy informality of Shakespearean dialogue; the poetic technique is so fluid, so expansive, it can keep shifting direction and yet always reach the goal. When you're in front of the *Marsyas,* you can't help thinking about the ways in which Titian's combination of the informal and the expressionist might validate one or another interlude in twentieth-century art (Gowing mentions Francis Bacon); but *The Flaying of Marsyas* is such an extraordinary painting, it finally refers to nothing but itself.

Most surprising to me was the great variety of focus and inflection in *The Flaying of Marsyas.* Certain areas—the nipples of the old man, the crown on Midas—are painted in an almost pop-up realism; other areas—the figure in the upper left, which may or may not be Apollo, and some passages of landscape—are frenetically loose. This disjuncture in handling (which might be due to incompleteness or retouching) suggests an artist who's working from area to area without much concern for overall effect, and this impression is underscored by the odd, crowded build-up of figures, especially on the right, where the gestures of the arms cancel out and overlap in surprising ways. At first, the painting makes sense in pieces. Only as I returned to the *Marsyas* several times over the course of a day did I begin to take it in as a complete, unified, sculptural whole. Which it is, it is.

Part of the oddness of the painting resides in the upside-downness of Marsyas. This upside-down image isn't original to Titian, but he insists on it in a primitive, almost ritualistic way. In its rigid frontal symmetry, *The Flaying of Marsyas* suggests a throwback to Byzantium: you feel locked into a magical exchange with the painting. I found myself turning my head on its side to see Marsyas's head right-side up, and other people have told me of similar experiences. An artist I know says she's had a reproduction of the painting in her studio for some time and for a while pinned it upside-down, so Marsyas the loser could hold his head high. There's a deep disturbance to universal order in the upside-downness of Marsyas.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

The consolations of Emerson

by James W. Tuttleton

Can anyone disagree that Ralph Waldo Emerson is the central figure in American literary and intellectual history? Virtually whatever subject concerns us, Emerson has been there already. Religion, philosophy, the spiritual life, mysticism, poetry, literary criticism, society and solitude, nature and politics, fate and freedom—Emerson's capacious mind has interrogated and absorbed them all. In memorable aphorisms that have entered the public consciousness, Emerson spoke the language of the poet; and in doing so he enfolded—one might even say in vexation—all of the irreconcilable diversities of life into a benign Oneness, figured as the platonic All or Over-Soul. A central figure in his own lifetime, Emerson has attained in our era a pre-eminence reflected in the excellent scholarship and criticism published in the past two decades. Harvard University Press has accorded Emerson a "definitive" multi-volume edition of his writings; Gay Wilson Allen has given us perhaps the last word about the externals of Emerson's life in *Waldo Emerson*; Hyatt Waggoner has acclaimed Emerson as our central man of imagination in *Emerson As Poet*; and even Harold Bloom has sanctified the Concord sage by claiming him, in a series of essays, as the spiritual father of orphic verse in Whitman, Stevens, Ashbery, Ammons, and Merwin. All roads appear to lead back to the questions posed by Emerson, the most critical of which is the status of the individual and his relationship to society.

It is therefore an event of some importance to have Emerson's view of the individual and society raised again by the major socialist literary critic of our time. For if the ideology of state power sanctioned in socialist politics is to persuade the hearts and minds of men, it must necessarily dispose of the claims for philosophical individualism espoused by Emerson in seminal essays like "Self-Reliance," "The Divinity School Address," "The American Scholar," and "Politics." A socialist critique of Emersonian individualism cannot condemn it by assertion, especially by a mere assertion of the supposed moral superiority of a collectivist or communitarian ideology. There must be a rigorous interrogation of Emerson's thought at the deepest level of political and cultural discourse. Is this interrogation provided in Irving Howe's new book? It is called *The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson.*[1]

The dust jacket lists Howe as the author of *World of Our Fathers, Politics and the Novel,* and *A Margin of Hope.* These books, together with *The Decline of the New, Thomas Hardy, William Faulkner,* and *The Critical Point,* provide very good reasons why Howe enjoys the position of Distinguished Professor of English at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. He is a man of acute in-

1 *The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson*; Harvard University Press; 99 pages, $12.50.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

telligence, critical insight, and compassionate sympathies. There is much that is likable about his style; a winsome personality shines through his prose. But what is not mentioned on the dust jacket is that Howe is also the author, co-author, or editor of a number of very different works that lay bare a political perspective from which all of his literary criticism issues. I have in mind here *The American Communist Party: A Critical History, Leon Trotsky, Steady Work: Essays in the Politics of Democratic Radicalism, The World of the Blue-Collar Worker, The Radical Papers, Essential Works of Socialism,* and, most recently, *Socialism and America.* And of course Howe is co-editor of *Dissent,* a socialist journal of cultural and political opinion.

Howe is not, then, your old-fashioned English professor with a primary interest in art, literature, or aesthetics. As an ardent socialist, he has a pronounced view of the social function of literature, of the American past, and he has an agenda for the political future—an agenda that most Americans would not find very congenial. Implicit in everything that Howe writes is the issue of how our literature bears upon the problem of social and political values. What does he have to say about culture and politics in the age of Emerson? Does he subject Emerson's individualism to a devastating critique founded on a politics favorable to the imperatives of democratic socialism? Surprisingly, the answer is no.

The American Newness is a strange, even a puzzling book. Although the dimensions of the subject are immense—think of F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*—Howe's study is exiguous: it is the printed form of the William E. Massey, Sr. lectures in the history of American civilization, which Howe delivered at Harvard University in 1985. The book has three sections, corresponding, no doubt, to the lectures, which I did not hear. They are "Emerson and Hawthorne," "Disciples and Critics," and "The Literary Legacy."

To summarize these lectures is difficult because, on the whole, they lack a clear focus, and Howe never develops a sustained literary argument. "Emerson and Hawthorne," for example, undertakes to subvert the common idea that these two writers were polar opposites by claiming that they shared in the common religious crisis of the 1830s. But for the young Emerson the crisis of the times was more a liberation than a source of anguish, although he was perturbed enough not to be wholly amused by the freakish manifestations of the Newness visible at, for example, the Chardon Street Convention of Friends of Universal Reform in 1840:

> The composition of the assembly was rich and various. The singularity and latitude of the summons drew together, from all parts of New England and also from the Middle States, men of every shade of opinion from the straitest orthodoxy to the wildest heresy, and many persons whose church was a church of one member only. A great variety of dialect and of costume was noticed; a great deal of confusion, eccentricity, and freak appeared, as well as of zeal and enthusiasm. If the assembly was disorderly, it was picturesque. Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians and Philosophers,—all came successively to the top, and seized their moment, if not their hour, wherein to chide, or pray, or preach, or protest.

And as for Hawthorne, the zanier manifestations of the Newness merely led him to insist on some very old verities of the human heart—like the fact of sin and the experience of guilt—as psychological constants from the Puritan era onward into our own time: his Puritan settings are merely adventitious.

In any case, Howe insists on Emerson and Hawthorne's common "devotion to *inwardness,* a risky, powerful mode of personal existence that, in its nineteenth-century romantic forms, is just starting to undergo historical test." I am curious about this historical test. Does he mean that we are now turning outward, toward more communitarian modes of existence? Given the worldwide fiascoes in socialist government rule

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

since 1917, the tendency would seem to be running the other way. But this sentence is typical of the rhetorical strategy of the book: it is impossible to say just what Howe means. We must agree with Howe, nevertheless, that Emerson was a revolutionary. He called for a revolution of consciousness, however, and declined to associate himself with the Brook Farm socialists.

In the second chapter, Howe takes up Thoreau and Whitman as disciples of Emerson's (the first in his proclamation of the alienation of labor, the second in his "democratization of the sublime"); and Hawthorne and Melville are seen as critics of Emerson's optative mood. Along the way, Howe invokes Marx, F. H. Bradley, Rashi's Commentaries on the Pentateuch, Ignazio Silone, Orestes Brownson, J. G. A. Pocock, and Isaiah Berlin—apparently to illustrate his view that "The experience of our century both underscores the inadequacies of an absolutist individualism and the dangers of too sweeping an attack upon it." (He does not dwell, however, on the latter dangers.) And the final chapter on "The Literary Legacy" offers "cameo descriptions" of some later nineteenth-century writing under these categories: the literature of fulfilling work (Twain's *Old Times on the Mississippi*); the literature of anarchic bliss (Huck and Jim on the raft); and "the literature of loss, announcing and mourning the end of 'the newness'" (Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and Melville's *Billy Budd*). But here, as before, discourse swings in and out of focus, as Howe's mind muses associatively upon some of the later writers of the century.

The title of the book suggests that Howe's focus will be the "Newness," a quaint but (at that time) an adequate term by which early nineteenth-century participants described the upsurge of spirituality that infused New England religion in the 1830s and 1840s. They did not quite know what to call this new spiritual dynamism, so they simply called it the "Newness." By and by the term "Transcendentalism" came into vogue; and indeed, Emerson came to write an essay called "The Transcendentalist" in 1842. Howe does not like the term "Transcendentalism" and rarely if ever uses it. One can see why: it points to a timeless dimension of reality, accessible to consciousness, that transcends ephemeral material and historical appearances. But "Transcendentalism" is not a synonym for the "Newness," since the associations of "Transcendentalism" now imply the philosophical, social, and literary expression that issued from the movement: Emerson's essays, Margaret Fuller's literary criticism, Thoreau's nature writings, Whitman's verse, etc. In my view the Newness properly denotes that transformation in New England religious thought and sensibility that reinvigorated what William Henry Channing called the "stunted stock of Unitarianism." Eventually, for some (like Emerson), even Unitarianism—as latitudinarian as it was—came to seem doctrinally restrictive, and a number of proponents of the Newness "signed off" the church membership rolls in order to become private seekers after religious truth; others enlisted in the non-doctrinaire Free Religious Societies that came to dot the New England landscape—groups much like our current Ethical Culture Society; others stayed within the Unitarian church and tried to infuse it with the new enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, Irving Howe does not accord any real importance to the Newness as a manifestion of a distinctive religious spirit. He does not discuss the origins of the Newness in Platonic and neo-Platonic idealism, or in the scriptures of Oriental pantheism then being circulated in New England, or in the mysticism of writers like Swedenborg, or in the then-current philosophical idealism of German and French thinkers like Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Jacobi, Constant, Cousin, and others. He ignores its distinctive formulation in the sermons of Theodore Parker, Frederic Henry Hedge, Channing, Emerson himself, and others who animated the Newness movement. We hear little of the vexing doctrines that led Emerson to complain of the "pale negations" of Unitarian orthodoxy, and there is no interro-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gation here of Emerson's reasons for resigning from the Second (Unitarian) Church ministry in Boston in 1832. "The Divinity School Address," Emerson's heretical attack on institutional Christianity, is scarcely even mentioned in Howe's study. Lawrence Buell, one of the specialists in this period of our cultural history, has remarked in an essay entitled "The Transcendentalist Movement" that "It is almost universally accepted that Transcendentalism was essentially a religious movement, although it also made use of philosophical methodology, was at least fitfully committed to secular causes, and expressed itself most characteristically in literature." Indeed, most historians and probably all scholars of American religious history would be surprised that a book could be devoted to the Newness without acknowledging, as its central energy, the religious impulses of spiritual renewal.

But Irving Howe is frankly not interested in religion here. For him, the Newness is merely a manifestation of the progressive spirit; it is merely an optimistic reflection of the Party of Hope, of reform sympathies, of the rise of democratic egalitarianism. Paradoxically, Howe presents the Newness as a precursor of attitudes that are, in some way, conformable to the principles of contemporary socialism. Since Emerson's thought is claimed by Howe to be "post-theological," it is like any other cultural discourse available to the secular mind. Howe assumes that we no longer need to trouble ourselves about the supernatural, that our modernism is the equivalent of skepticism. But in this Emerson would have been scandalized. His spiritual project was in part to sacralize all of existence, to claim Nature itself as supernatural—not to countenance the modern secularization and materialization of thought and feeling.

Howe knows that Emerson claims his truth to be timeless and eternal and that Emerson rejects the explanation of consciousness in terms of any historical determinism. But Howe here differs sharply from Emerson and insists on seeing him as a mere product of the cultural forces that shaped him. While Howe claims as his intention the wish to understand—"What were they up to, Emerson and his disciples? What drove them, what blinded them? And, pieties apart, what can they still mean to us?"—*The American Newness* is an instance of the gap between modern skepticism and religious faith. Howe is "cool to revelation," as he admits, and so quickly arrives at the point "where the secular and religious minds cannot engage with each other." The pieties that animated Emerson and some of his contemporaries (and some of ours) are beyond Howe's range of interest. For him, politics has replaced religion.

Howe begins his second lecture with a question that, by its very rhetorical form, insinuates an attitude that we might have been prepared to expect in the editor of *Dissent*:

> Truthfully, are we to take seriously the annunciation of a new mankind by a small-town ex-minister who wrote obscure essays and lectured to miscellaneous audiences? Who tells us that currents of divinity flow through every soul, God being neither source nor end but the current itself? And this at a time when Andrew Jackson is grappling with the banks, the Abolitionists have declared war on slavery, and the country is preparing to tear itself apart?

The very formulation of the alternatives suggests Howe's interest in the tensions of capitalism, the conflict over the definition of property, and their implied significance as the cause of war. He may be right to claim the importance of these aspects of the historical moment, but the claim is made at the expense of other questions—of consciousness, of ontology, of epistemology—that also have their importance. Since Howe invokes the historical moment, it is worth observing that Emerson's contemporaries took his questions and answers very seriously indeed, and responded to him in a range of reactions from reverent adoration to accusations of infidelity. Further, in our own time, Emerson is still very popular; his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INCHARDI

Novels by J. Inchardi
$15 each

Lines On The Death Of A Fisherman

Three Jews In A Tub

Dreamship

Yurros

A Paper Toy

Intercurse

Jehovah Mafioso

Saturn Maru

Drek Shlak

Om Budsman

Order from **Sirius Books**
P.O. Box 177
Freeport, Maine 04032

importance as a source of spiritual inspiration and the acclaimed truth-value of his thought are manifest even in our political life. Quentin Anderson, for one, has done Emerson the honor of taking him very seriously, in *The Imperial Self,* where he has found in Emerson's influence a malignity responsible for the student rebellion of the Sixties, the general self-indulgent preoccupations of the Me-Decade, the decline of the family, and the deterioration of the social fabric. Anderson argues that we must take Emerson seriously, if we are to understand the appeal of his definition of human potentiality, of his argument for the centrality of the self, for the nature of the being that animates us, for the relation of the self to the social order.

Howe knows Emerson's importance, knows his exalted stature, and is therefore reluctant to reject his thought out of hand, and so turns aside from the quick put-down that a socialist critic of American individualism might well formulate. Though Howe's is self-confessedly a "non-Emersonian angle of vision," he accords to Emerson a continuous wary respect, treats him very gingerly, almost affectionately. In fact, Howe dissociates himself from Quentin Anderson and other critics who see Emerson as the source of many of our social ills. Howe thus avoids a direct assault on Emerson such as we might have expected from a socialist. Why is this? Was Howe reluctant to attack Emerson on his own hallowed ground—before an audience of Harvard students and professors? To this question I shall return. But in the meantime it is worth noting that Howe takes his lead from Emerson's own shrewd tactics: Howe refuses to argue with Emerson, to debate, or to give reasons. If he disagrees, he insinuates as much, usually in a most circuitous and roundabout way.

An instance of Howe's avoidance of the central conflict of ideologies is his refusal to take up directly Emerson's ontology of the Divine Being, his epistemology of Reason (Intuition), his Natural Supernaturalism—in short, all of the ideas so memorably presented in *Nature* and "The Divinity School

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Address." Perhaps a more telling case is his refusal to address the propositions announced in Emerson's "Self-Reliance." Here, if anywhere, is a text worthy of a socialist's heavy artillery. For Emerson is absolute in his objection to ideologies that center on the state, on society, or on the collectivization of the individual will. What will Howe do with this ringing assertion?

> Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Here is another proposition for a socialist to conjure with: "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist." And another: "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." And finally: "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature." Unfortunately, Howe ignores all of these flamboyant Emersonian propositions.

Yet so central is the self in Emerson's thought, so pervasive has his individualism become in the Western world, that to attack the self on every front has become a staple of Marxism. On the political Left, individualism is attacked as a vestige of bourgeois morality because it is too selfish, antisocial, lacking in fraternal feeling, and, because anarchic, subversive to political organization. In left-wing philosophical thought, the self as the *cogito* has come under attack by Theodor W. Adorno in *Against Epistemology*; the Marxist critic Frederic Jameson has fulminated against our preoccupation with the Leibnizian self as "monad"; and various left-wing structuralists have proclaimed the death of the self rather gleefully, if prematurely. Where does Howe stand with respect to Emerson's view of the centrality of the self and the secondary, even inimical, status of the collectivity?

We shall come to that in a moment. But first let us press Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance a bit further. Emerson is explicit in his aversion to those humanitarian sympathies that manifest themselves in charities, philanthropy, and the like. For example, this from "Self-Reliance":

> . . . do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies;—though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar, which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.

Emerson did not of course believe in social welfare programs, whether run by the churches or by the state, because they subvert individual initiative and dull the energy of a man to help himself, and so enmesh him more deeply in dependency on others. This is precisely the argument conservatives make today. If Emerson had no use for philanthropy to foreign missions, it was because he believed that the reformer had an obligation closer to home: to help the disadvantaged to develop a self-reliant autonomy.

A socialist, I should imagine, would want to address Emerson's attitudes directly. Yet Howe never does this. Nowhere does he engage Emerson head-on; nowhere does he grapple with the central essays that bear upon the doctrines of socialism; nowhere does Howe cite and interrogate the central texts which have made Emerson an influential figure who commands our attention a century and a half later. It is possible to do this, and, in my judgment, it is a necessity, although the angle of attack from the political left will lead us, I am afraid, into a worse

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quagmire. The inadequacy of Emersonian individualism is that—taken seriously, as I take it—it erodes the foundation of democratic politics; it makes impossible negotiated compromises which are necessary in a pluralistic society of legitimate competing interests; and it rests its claim on "Higher Laws," said to be subjectively known, which have a greater authority than constitutions, statutes, and enacted laws. The proper response to Emerson, I believe, begins with a consideration of what the *Federalist Papers* rightly has to say about the nature of fallible man, the imperfect character of all societies, the dangers of majority power, and the limited capacities of government.

In any case, instead of confronting Emerson directly, Howe elects to let Hawthorne and Melville mount the attack for him. Howe argues that in Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molyneaux," Emersonian individualism devolves, in Robin, into a "low cunning," a shrewd grasp of self-interest that leads him to abandon his kinsman to the tar-and-feather mob. Melville's *Moby-Dick* is put to a similar service in illustrating "the split between democratic fraternity and aggrandizing individualism." In all of this, Howe is not wrong. Melville and Hawthorne, whatever they shared of the symbolizing tendencies of American Transcendental thought, were rightly skeptical of Emerson's unrealistic optimism, of his exaltation of mere man into a godlike figure, of his tendency to dismiss evil as the "mere privation of good," and of his readiness to tolerate social evils as merely misunderstood elements in the Over-Soul's beneficent and harmonious plan. But one wishes that Howe had offered the critique himself. Then the premises of his argument would have been clearer, and the adequacy of his evidence could have been examined in detail. Instead, he counterproposes fictional narratives, which are susceptible of various interpretations. This complicates an understanding of Howe's position. For example, how far down the road will Howe go with Hawthorne and Melville? Does not their perception of radical evil in the heart of man undercut the utopian implications of socialist idealism?

Howe also evades the problem posed by Emerson's individualism in the area of politics itself. Here we might have expected him to wax eloquent on the greater social value of a political organization of society that ministers compassionately to the economic claims of democratic fraternity. Strangely, Howe ignores Emerson's essay "Politics" altogether. Perhaps the reason is not far to seek. In "Politics" Emerson is quite straightforward in claiming for government the function of protecting the rights of private property. Democracy may be "better for us," but that is only "because the religious sentiment of the present time accords better with it." Emerson is in fact fundamentally skeptical of politics, of political parties, and of the claims for the centrality of the state. Since he believed that "Every actual State is corrupt," it followed that "Good men must not obey the laws too well." Perhaps the central Emersonian position on politics is formulated in the following passage. I had occasion to quote this passage in these pages a year ago, in rebuttal of David Bromwich, another *Dissent* author who was then claiming Emerson to be a spiritual father of left-wing radicalism.[2] Since Howe seems disposed to use Emerson in the same way, I shall quote the passage again:

> . . . the less government we have the better—the fewer laws, and the less confided power. The antidote to this abuse of formal government is the influence of private character, the growth of the Individual; the appearance of the principal to supersede the proxy; the appearance of the wise man; of whom the existing government is, it must be owned, but a shabby imitation. That which all things tend to educe; which freedom, cultivation, intercourse, revolutions, go to form and deliver, is character; that is the end of Nature, to reach unto this coronation of her king. To educate the wise man the State exists, and with the

2 See "American Literary Radicalism in the Twenties," in the March, 1985, issue of *The New Criterion*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> appearance of the wise man the State expires. The appearance of character makes the State unnecessary. The wise man is the State.

Can any socialist conceivably assimilate this view of the state into his own collectivist ideology, however much it may share the Marxist fantasy of a utopian future in which the state will have withered away? Can any conservative or liberal democrat assent to it? I do not think so. For the assumption on which it is based—that the state can provide an education sufficient to make man a law unto himself—vastly overrates both the capacity of man for personal perfection and the capacity of government for rational conduct. Yet Emerson seems sincerely to have believed that Love could be the basis of politics and complained that it had never been tried.

In any case, Irving Howe never grapples directly with this central formulation of Emerson's political thought. The nearest he will permit himself to a direct criticism of Emersonian individualism is to quote Orestes Brownson, one of Emerson's contemporaries, who condemned the self-reliance doctrine in a proto-Marxist essay called "The Laboring Classes":

> Self-culture is a good thing, but it cannot abolish inequality, nor restore men to their rights. As a means of quickening moral and intellectual energy . . . and preparing the laborer to contend manfully for his rights, we admit its importance . . . but as constituting in itself a remedy for the vices of the social state we have no faith in it . . .
>
> The truth is, the evil we have pointed out is not merely individual in character . . . What is purely individual in its nature, efforts of individuals to perfect themselves may remove. But the evil we speak of is inherent in all our social arrangements, and cannot be cured without a radical change of those arrangements.

We might very well expect this statement to represent Howe's considered judgment of the defect of Emerson's philosophy of

Egon Schiele, *Portrait Study*, 1911

Female Figures and also Mark Tobey: Selected Works

15 April
through
July 1986

Helen Serger
la boetie, inc.

9 East 82nd Street
New York 10028
Tel. (212) 535-4865

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

radical individualism, which, as a matter of plain logic, tends in the direction of political anarchy. But Howe's continuous wary respect for Emerson keeps reasserting itself; he constantly surprises us. Of this passage he has the candor to remark that the radical change of social arrangements that has occurred since the time of Emerson and Brownson—I suppose that he must mean the Communist revolutions of Russia, Eastern Europe, Cuba, and elsewhere—"brought neither greater freedom nor relief for the laboring classes. We are inclined to reject," Howe concludes, "a simple dichotomy between social transformation and individual regeneration; we insist . . . on their interdependence."

It strikes me that this insistence on individual regeneration is quite vague, since Howe has already rejected the religious assumptions of the Newness and apparently those of any other religion based on revelation. He never clarifies what he means, but obviously Emerson is somehow the key. What seems clear, in any case, is that Howe's avoidance of a direct engagement with Emerson has had, all along, a strategic purpose. He wishes to salvage Emerson for the Left, to claim him as a precursor of radical thought, in effect to align Emerson's centrality with a socialist hope—perhaps for the nationalization of industries, the redistribution of wealth, or new state-sponsored forms of social welfare. But Howe is never specific. Instead, he uses unexceptionable euphemisms like effecting the goals of "social liberalism," or attaining a "democratic fraternity," or realizing racial and gender equality. What democrats, of either the Right or Left, will disagree with such noble intentions? The issue is the Left's confusion of civil rights with economic rights; the issue is how socialist governments inevitably foreclose opportunities for self-actualization in the spiritual life.

In any case, there really is no need to specify a socialist political agenda at all in a book like this. Such an agenda is so far from realization in our time as to seem distantly utopian, as in fact it is. We have had now, for some years, one of the most conservative governments since the Hoover era. It has been elected and re-elected precisely because of the post-World War II drift toward socialism. Anyone reading the Winter 1985 issue of *Dissent* will have to agree with Howe's poignant remark there that, for socialists, the last national election was "a severe defeat" that "cannot be explained simply by citing President Reagan's popularity." It is "a sign and consequence of conservative moods." Yet even though the socialist agenda has been thoroughly rejected by the American electorate, for Howe hope springs eternal. And this hope for a new social order suggests perhaps why Howe has appropriated Emerson and the Newness for his own purposes. I shall quote the concluding paragraphs of *The American Newness,* for implicit in them is the key to Howe's wish to save Emerson for the uses to which socialist ideology may put him. Before doing so, however, I think it important to forewarn the reader of two distortions that seem evident. The first has to do with Howe's implied definition of the Newness, which is distinctly unhistorical and stripped of its central religious implication; the second has to do with Howe's implicit sense of what individual regeneration means, a sense that has really nothing whatever to do with Emerson's mandate. Here are the paragraphs:

> "The newness" will come again. It is intrinsic to our life. It can take many forms, my own hope being for a difficult mixture of social liberalism and a reaffirmed and critical sense of self. But it will return, failing in success, succeeding in failure, "the green light, the orgiastic future."
>
> Simple Emersonians we can no longer be. We are descendants, through mixed blood, who have left home after friendly quarrels. Yet the patriarch's voice still rings clear: "This confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs . . . to the American Scholar . . . Patience —patience . . . A nation of men will for the first time exist."
>
> Patience? After all these bitter years? Darkened with the knowledge of loss, he speaks

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> again: "Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart!—it seems to say—there is victory yet for all justice."

Emerson is thus salvaged for his inspirational value, for the encouragement of the lonely ideologue in a dark time for socialism in America: Emerson counsels patience and renewed activity. Never mind that the activity Emerson commends is poles apart from the collectivization of the individual will in a socialist polity. Emerson's hortatory idealism can now be reinterpreted in a purely secular way. This is astute, even sly: it aligns Emerson with collectivist thought as straightforward engagement with his ideas could never have done. It appeals to our sympathy and pity. But, finally, it is sentimental—like the irrelevant allusion to *The Great Gatsby*'s "orgiastic future." *The American Newness* only illustrates the accusation that Howe invokes against Harold Bloom's reading of Emerson; "you can find almost anything you want in Emerson's writings." Almost—but not quite. One cannot find in the sage of Concord adequate support for an ideology of secular socialism. In the Preface, Howe confesses: "Nor do I add a mite of scholarship to the study of nineteenth-century American culture." In the humility of this observation, he is at last absolutely right.

Decline of the self

William Barrett Death of the Soul: From Descartes to the Computer. Doubleday, 166 pages, $16.95

reviewed by Roger Kimball

In this slim and engagingly personal book, William Barrett attempts to sketch the fate of the self in Western philosophy from the seventeenth through the twentieth century. He variously describes his theme as "the drama of mind within our modern Western civilization," "the search for the self," and "the loss of the self in the modern world." Like *Irrational Man* (1958), which probably remains Mr. Barrett's best-known work on philosophy, the present volume is gently existentialist in orientation; like his more recent *The Illusion of Technique* (1978), it exhibits a deep suspicion of modern science and technology; and like all Mr. Barrett's work, *Death of the Soul* is clearly written and easily accessible to the general reader. Mr. Barrett remarks in the course of his discussion that "philosophy loses much of its vitality if it loses contact with the life of the people." His direct, if not particularly elegant, style of writing assures him of the vital contact he admires.

The book's central thesis is that since Descartes and the birth of the "new science" in the seventeenth century, man's self or "soul" has been increasingly threatened by Western culture's commitment to objectivity and scientific rationality. In the competing philosophical theories of the self that have been bequeathed to us, Mr. Barrett finds a vivid record of reason's self-depredations. "The presence of mind is everywhere in the formation of this science," he writes,

> and yet the results of this science were to be alleged as evidence for some general mechanistic view of the world, according to which the human mind appears as feeble and unfree. That is a paradox and an irony that ever since have haunted the thinking of our modern epoch.

In his view, philosophy has articulated this paradox in a succession of theories that depreciate all that is most personal, individual, and valuable about the individual. Descartes's image of man as essentially *res cogitans*, as "thinking substance," is for Mr. Barrett emblematic of this tendency, as is the empiricist view—associated especially with Locke and Hume—that the self is nothing more than a "bundle of sensations." Though opposed in other ways, both views reduce the self to an abstract construct that fails to allow for the richness of lived experience. And while he deals almost exclu-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sively with the image of the self as it is represented in philosophical writings, Mr. Barrett's chief concern is with the fate of the self in everyday life, with "the reality of consciousness as we actually experience it." Accordingly, he criticizes the abstract, jargon-laden habits of expression that have taken hold in our time. "It is characteristic of our technical civilization," he notes, "that it tends to proliferate in precise or pseudo-precise language that leaves us more confused about the matters of ordinary life than we would otherwise be. We are on the way to becoming a culture swamped by its own verbalisms."

Mr. Barrett acknowledges important exceptions to the "flight from consciousness" he discerns in modern Western thought. Leibniz with his doctrine of monads and Kierkegaard with his radical subjectivity, for example, emerge as dissenting heroes in this regard. But by and large Mr. Barrett views Western culture since the seventeenth century as engaged in a progressively more concerted attack on the traditional notion of the self. "In contemporary culture," he writes near the end of the book, "mind and self have become pretty much disappearing items."

None of this, of course, is particularly new. Complaints about the nihilistic implications of modern science have long been a staple of philosophical brooding. "Since Copernicus," Nietzsche reflected gloomily in *The Genealogy of Morals,* "man seems to have gotten himself on an inclined plane—now he is slipping faster and faster away from the center into—what? into nothingness? into a '*penetrating* sense of his nothingness?'" And classic works like Alexandre Koyré's *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* and Ernst Cassirer's *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* have outlined the philosophical origin of that distinctively modern view of the world from which, as Koyré put it, "all coherence was gone and in which the skies no longer announced the glory of God." More recently, Hans Blumenberg's monumental studies of the evolution of modernity have contributed much subtlety and qualification—though not perhaps quite so much clarity—to this picture.

But I suspect that in *Death of the Soul* Mr. Barrett is not attempting so much to supplement as to consolidate in a brief, readable compass some of this received wisdom about the vicissitudes of man's self-image in the modern age. He announces the book's main theme in a foreword entitled "Banishing Consciousness":

> In the three and a half centuries since modern science entered the world, we have added immeasurably to our knowledge of physical nature, in scope, depth, and subtlety. But our understanding of human consciousness in this time has become more fragmentary and bizarre, until at present we seem in danger of losing any intelligent grasp of the human mind altogether.

The remainder of the book is divided into three parts and ten chapters. Part one, "Gathering of a New Age," comprises three chapters and is devoted to the major philosophical currents of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Mr. Barrett briefly discusses the work of Descartes, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and others, recounting what he takes to be the origins of our current "fragmentary and bizarre" understanding of human consciousness in their overly restricted notions of personal identity. The four chapters of part two, "The Pivot," deal largely with the decisive impact of Kant's attempt to answer Hume's skeptical assaults on the idea of causality and the traditional notion of a subsisting, unified self. And finally, the three chapters of part three, "Dispersion," trace the multifaceted legacy of Kant's critical philosophy from Hegel and Nietzsche through Russell, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre, and others. For Mr. Barrett, the English mathematician and computer innovator Alan Turing epitomized the drift of our culture when he suggested, in 1950, that computers might one day be capable of thought: what could be more emblematic of "the effort to undermine . . . the spiritual status of the human person"?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Spiritual;" indeed, turns out to be a loaded word in the pages of *Death of the Soul*. As his title suggests, Mr. Barrett's concerns here are at bottom as much religious as philosophical. I doubt, in fact, whether he would want to distinguish sharply between the two disciplines. In one passage, Mr. Barrett describes philosophy as "the effort of our human mind to know itself and take stock of the universe and our place in it"—not a particularly precise formulation, perhaps, but fair enough as far as it goes. On the very next page, however, he assures us that "The religious question is ultimately at the center of all philosophy, even if it be by way of rejection." Many philosophers would want to take exception to this assertion, maintaining that in a secular age philosophy might well treat "ultimate" questions, might well be "the effort of the human mind to know itself and take stock of the universe and our place in it," without therefore necessarily being religious. Mr. Barrett knows this, of course, but one senses that for him contemporary philosophy's lack of interest in religious questions *as* religious questions is part of the problem he is attempting to describe.

The conflation of philosophy and religion in Mr. Barrett's book is signaled in numerous ways; for example, he uses the term "soul" more or less interchangeably with the terms "self," "mind," and even "person." And while most of his sources are first of all philosophers, not religious writers, the ambiance, as it were, of his reflections is crystallized in an expression of extreme cosmological *Angst* from Pascal, quoted by Mr. Barrett near the beginning of *Death of the Soul*:

> When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened, and I am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and this time been allotted to me? The eternal silence of those infinite spaces frightens me.

Mr. Barrett returns to Pascal later in his book, suggesting that the "alienation" described in this famous passage from *Pensées* runs through "the whole of modern culture" and that "ultimately this alienation will be healed only if the universe is believed to have some meaning in harmony with our own spiritual and moral aims—which means, in effect, the discovery or rediscovery of God." We may leave to one side the question of whether overcoming this "alienation" is tantamount to "the discovery or rediscovery of God," or whether, indeed, overcoming it would in fact be a desirable thing. Perhaps, like most visions of unalienated existence, it could be realized only at the expense of our humanity. But Mr. Barrett's suggestion does bring to mind Hegel's warning in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that "philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying." The modern age is spiritually "impoverished," Hegel admitted, but it was his view that philosophy could be edifying only at the expense of its critical rigor.

It is especially on the question of rigor, I think, that Mr. Barrett's analysis must give us pause. In such a short work, he obviously cannot hope to provide us with anything approaching a full account of the many thinkers and theories he discusses. He paints with such a large brush that subtlety and detail are necessarily lost. And to be fair, exegesis is not his primary aim; rather, he wants to provide us with "a map of the modern world," as he puts it in one of his chapter titles—that is, with a panorama of our spiritual situation and a brief account of how it came to be the way it is.

Yet the authority of any such overview will nonetheless depend to a large extent on the accuracy and power—if not the completeness—of its individual interpretations, and here, I'm afraid, Mr. Barrett often fails us. Many of his summaries are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not only perforce sketchy, they are downright questionable. For example—and I pick more or less at random—Mr. Barrett tells us that "The body, as Descartes conceives it, is not such that it can accommodate the soul. It cannot, so to speak, be penetrated by the soul; it can only remain in external contact with it." But in his sixth Meditation, Descartes insists that "I am not present in my body merely as a pilot is present in a ship; I am most tightly bound to it, and as it were mixed up with it, so that I and it form a unit." Now, I do not mean to defend Descartes's account of the relation between the mind and the body; but whatever its flaws, it is too rich and nuanced an account to fit comfortably into the simplified schema that Mr. Barrett provides for it. Indeed, all too often in this book, Mr. Barrett's attempts to provide us with neat encapsulations of the various philosophers he discusses result in little more than a caricature of their thought.

In the end, though, there remains much that is laudable about Mr. Barrett's aims in this book. If the particulars of his argument are sometimes vague or unreliable, his larger points are generally well-taken and often quietly illuminating. After all, there is much to be said for returning philosophy to a consideration of "the reality of consciousness as we actually experience it." And as a pedagogical example, Mr. Barrett can be taken as something of a model. One is not surprised to discover that in his many years as Professor of Philosophy at New York University, Mr. Barrett enjoyed a reputation as an inspiring teacher: philosophy for him is clearly no merely abstract, academic exercise, it is a matter of the most pressing concern. In the *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein suggests that all philosophical problems have the form, "I have lost my way." And in this sense, considered as a meditation on this most fundamental philosophical problem, Mr. Barrett's book can be said to have provided an eloquent testimony to the continued vitality of the spirit of philosophical inquiry.

From 1066 to now

The Bayeux Tapestry. Introduction, description, and commentary by David M. Wilson. Knopf, 234 pages, $75

reviewed by Creighton Gilbert

The Bayeux tapestry is unique in several distinct ways, so much so as to expand our sense of the range of works of visual art. Technically it is the one large-scale embroidery that survives from the eleventh century. (The misnomer "tapestry" may register the fact that that medium is more common in the medieval objects that have survived to our day.) As to thematic category, it is the only complex image of its age and area with a secular story to tell. But most of all, it is special in a way quickly obvious and magnetic to every observer—as a visual record of the great historic event of its place and time: the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. Scholars generally agree that the work was made no more than fifteen years later. It is what we would have if a picture chronicle of Columbus's voyage had been produced around 1502, transforming our way of knowing that event from the verbal (which it remains) to the optical, from radio to television news. The tapestry is more than that, however. Because the verbal records of the time are skimpy, it stands as the unique report on many points. For the English even today, the Norman Conquest seems to be the most critical fact in the national past, as suggested by the title of the long-popular spoof of school history-teaching: *1066 and All That.* From this context there now emerges a quite beautiful book, the first to show every detail of the sixty-odd meters of cloth in color photographs which were themselves produced in connection with a recent campaign of cleaning and re-installation.

There exists a small number of works of art that may be described as completely accepted national icons. The way they are perceived seems to have been thought about only case by case, but a significant general

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pattern seems to be involved. In this country, prime examples are the Statue of Liberty, *Washington Crossing the Delaware,* and *The Flag Raising at Iwo Jima.* In diametric contrast to nearly all other works of art from the same culture, interest in these works ignores the identity of their artists. They function on their own, and with a sensational degree of success. It is tacitly accepted that they state fully something we all wish to have stated. The visual forms by themselves communicate—unambiguously, universally, and in a way that cannot be restated in words. Although nothing like this happens with the works of art by leading artists in our culture, it seems likely that it did happen in past cultures, when art was not a primarily private expression. The frescoes of the Sistine Ceiling, in a powerful way, and minor works of their time, in a weaker way, may be understood as having for their purpose this publicly shared kind of assertion. They told their original audience, and they still tell us, in most satisfactory fashion, what we have wanted to agree on, and that has been the test of their quality and the reason for their fame.

For these images to gain approval, it is essential that we be already steeped in the context to which they refer. Hence, such icons do not travel. We only absorb the *Creation of Adam* to the extent that the Biblical story is still in us; we do not see the effectiveness of the corresponding Buddhist work. With national icons it is even harder; we tend not to know what they are in, say, Germany or Peru, and when faced with them, we are not impressed. A comic token of this appears in the preface contributed to this book by the Mayor of Bayeux. We can agree, even if we had not thought of it, that the tapestry is not only an English favorite but also a Norman one; after all, it does explain that the Normans beat the English. But I am pretty sure no outsider would have expected it to be linked, as it is by the Mayor, with "the great Norman writers, Corneille, Flaubert, Maupassant, Barbey d'Aurevilly." Corneille was a Norman? There is a Norman category of literature? Evidently to the Normans there is, and it tells them important and satisfying things about themselves.

Leutze, the painter of *Washington,* and Bartholdi, the sculptor of the Statue of Liberty, can be presumed to have had such an achievement in mind. As traditional academicians, they were attached to past assumptions about the possibilities of art. Joe Rosenthal, the photographer of *Iwo Jima,* cannot be so presumed. The relation between his photograph and a million unsuccessful others, analogous in theme and in the visual qualities of the medium, is much like the relation between the other works mentioned above and analogous patriotic paintings and statues. If Rosenthal's one success is called a lucky accident, we must also take into account that their successes were too, since they also were never able to repeat them.

What appears in all three cases, detaching these works from the competition, is an artistic matter: composition. The positions of arms or bodies or objects, read as abstract layout, form a pattern that affects us as inevitable. It may seem less peculiar to think of the perhaps accidental composition of the news photograph as pictorial (like the once achieved, hence plainly lucky, hence not very far from accidental, composition of *Washington*) if we observe in a painting a design remarkably similar to *Iwo Jima*'s. The essential notion in the photograph—the lifting of the pole (seen halfway up), the zeroing-in of effort by the men in a triangle below, the potential for the pole to rise into the empty triangle above—is singularly like what we see in a masterpiece by Caravaggio, the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter.* If *Iwo Jima* seems pictorial, well, Caravaggio has always seemed "photographic." Caravaggio's success was not luck—he made it work every time—but his use of the relation of a reality we instantly know to an extreme simplicity of layout matches the special quality of this photograph.

Iwo Jima and Leonardo's *Last Supper* are the only two-dimensional images I know that have generated copies in colossal public sculpture. Such an act makes real the critic's comment: "it's monumental." The act hon-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

oring the Bayeux tapestry is different, and connected with a factor that prevents it from being the same type of universally popular national icon. That factor is the foreignness of its Romanesque stylistic language, distant from all but a sophisticated public. And yet it confers an equal if different power. What that power is can be suggested even by its installation in a special room (in the Bayeux museum) with custom lighting, a room built both to preserve and to let us see the tapestry, very much a shrine. The most powerful similar instance is the small building in Jerusalem housing the Dead Sea Scrolls. Their immense importance for Israeli viewers is the tangible reinforcement they give to the idea that this is their ancestral land. Continuity with the past for most of the Peoples of the Book is usually conceptual; the physical book need not be old. It is thus almost ironic that nothing can equal the effectiveness of the actual inked cloths of millennia ago, available to our sense experience today. That they are behind glass and so cannot be touched is a token of their preciousness—as their difference from modern books is a token of their ancientness. So too the otherness of the style of the Bayeux tapestry communicates the long ancestry of the English institutions that descend from 1066, most obviously the monarchy, but implicitly even larger matters: the nation as military winner, as keeper of morality, as deviser of common law. That one has to identify with the Norman invader seems not to matter.

The age of such icons need not be great. In America two of our best ones are in the shrine called the Air and Space Museum, which more millions of people visit than any other; they are the Wright brothers' and Lindbergh's airplanes, infinitely patched in loving historic preservation. It is their obvious distance in visual form from the planes we build today that makes the impact. Just as with the tapestry and the scrolls, these icons serve as witnesses to ancestry—in this case, the ancestry of our self-image as the people who invent, and the ones whose inventions combine clever tinkering with heroic risk.

In the Bayeux tapestry the story line is for the most part sharp and vivid, through many quickly shifting scenes with new characters. It is less so at the end, where the battle goes on for a long time, and in a way that doesn't seem to change very much, though the specifics were evidently exciting to the maker. The two contrasting elements here are reminiscent of Shakespeare's history plays, which were part of the same tradition of English communal autobiography; in both the intently focused politics of the individual characters gives way in act five to a lot of standardized rushing about. The tapestry is even more like *Macbeth,* where the politics is about a king in the eleventh century who commits feudal betrayal and reaps destruction—and where the vision of the future kings up to Shakespeare's time makes explicit the point about modern relevance.

The editor of this edition, David M. Wilson, provides the usual background essay on the events shown in the tapestry. This is neatly done, and so is another section naturally stimulated by the work's documentary uniqueness. That is the discussion of its evidence of eleventh-century costume, shipbuilding, horse tack, and much else. What is lacking is a response to the work of art, even though, I would suggest, the correctness of the artist's descriptions of all those objects was a function of the period style. The tapestry is a beautiful example of the Romanesque, with its devotion to "maximum articulation," in Panofsky's phrase. People are organized as collections of bent limbs, the better to show just what they are doing, and mostly in profile for still greater expository clarity; and objects are similarly subdivided, with webbed line systems that vibrate along their lengths as they show off their purposes. It all looks like engineering blueprints for assembling human beings and their environments out of a box of parts, for specialized functions like kneeling or hauling. Yet the tapestry is not one of the standard items emphasized in surveys of the most notable works of Romanesque art. It is the existence in it of other values important to us, absent in most works of art of its time, that has

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

made this art-historical neglect possible. If the tapestry were to appear in the middle of a series of Romanesque pictures it would call for a shift of gears in us, even in an uncomfortable way, just as the inclusion of Liberty in a series of nineteenth-century aesthetic objects would.

But this neglect has had regrettable effects on art-historical judgment. An example is the statement, published as recently as 1977 in a book review in a learned journal by a well-qualified medievalist, that "in the civilization of the Middle Ages purely secular works tend to be few and of little significance." By a wonderful accident, two correctives appeared in the same issue, in the book reviews immediately before and after. The former praised the author of a book on Romanesque illuminated manuscripts in England for not limiting himself in the traditional way to a few types of liturgical books. The author was said to have "been more representative" by including, in addition to theological works, "chronicles, classical dramas, contemporary scientific works such as herbals and medical handbooks, as well as the always popular bestiaries." The latter review took up a study of the illustrated manuscripts in a medieval medical treatise; the convincingness of their fresh renderings of daily life is like the tapestry. If all these were dubbed insignificant, still any survey of medieval book illustrations would be expected to cite achievements like the renderings of medicinal herbs in the Vienna Dioscorides, the astronomical personifications in the Leiden Aratus, or the animal fables in the Berne Physiologus. More in general, the scholarly surveys of Dante illustrations and of illuminated Bolognese law books have made clear that they were not few. Medieval universities were academies for theology, law, and medicine, and medieval illustrated books seem naturally to show the same interests as those of bookish people.

The tapestry is a document informative not only on politics and shipbuilding but also on art history. As soon as this point is raised (which it generally is not) it is evident that the tapestry was not unique; its complex but very assured execution implies a tradition, of workmanship and of patrons' demands for similar objects. The relative rarity of secular art in this period must be linked in significant part to its lesser capacity to survive to our day. Architecture makes that plain when we see that medieval castles are all in ruins. And so we mostly inspect the better preserved churches, though the castles were certainly as numerous at the time. The churches have benefited from nearly continuous institutional ownership by immortal corporations, mostly peaceful, while the castles were objects not only of attack but also of neglect, as they became obsolete or as families died out or lost wealth or moved away. Indeed, the Bayeux tapestry only survives because it was donated to a church; the same is true in Renaissance Florence for large parts of Lorenzo the Magnificent's vast collection of classical and other gems and vases (a story told, as it happens, in still another book review in the same 1977 magazine). Without that kind of accident, the odds against secular art's surviving were high.

Mr. Wilson tells us only spottily about the part of the imagery that is not a narrative of events: the borders. They generally get more relative attention in art historical writings, like the Pelican History of Art; but there the entire account of the tapestry is likely to be short. The borders are fascinating, and again enrich our sense of the range of representation. The upper border is, to be sure, mostly a frieze of elegant, if very individual, birds. On the lower border, however, these are often interrupted by other things, increasingly as the story goes on, suggesting an evolution in the design. Increasingly, too, there seems to be a kind of annotation commenting on the larger scenes above. This is generic when we get scenes of hunting and plowing under the part of the narrative where the Norman feudal lords travel between their castles. When the birds and animals seem to enact some of Aesop's fables it seems likely that the border is drawing sententious inferences from the historical events, as fables normally do; but we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cannot understand the specifics. Things are plainer when the Norman army crosses the channel and the border shifts at once to fish and some wonderfully perceived eels. Most surprisingly, we are given a couple of pornographic scenes, with a clearly comic quality; they also illustrate that the Romanesque style is well suited to the pornographic, because of its emphasis on blueprinting the motions of body parts. But the largest series comes at the end, beneath the battle. The main area includes a few defeated knights on the ground; in the border we get over a score of them, clearly dead, though in active sprawled poses, some without their heads. The last group is being stripped of armor, which is pulled over their heads, and their nakedness is clearly seen as humiliating: we jeer at it. This brilliant series, to which I know no parallel, disposes of any potential theory that the distinction of the lower-border series is to be assigned to comic relief or to aspects involving lower rank or class. What all these motifs do seem to have in common, as against the main area, is that they forego dignity. The central chronicle is then allowed to be entirely serious and proper, even as the tale bursts with the need to involve those levels implicit in it which would contradict that tone.

All this is very much like the drolleries of manuscripts, as we see them in one of the greatest examples, the Book of Hours at the Cloisters by the fourteenth-century master Jehan Pucelle. Where his main scene shows the angel announcing the birth of Christ to the shepherds, the little scene in the lower margin shows the shepherds' horseplay. Where the main scene shows the three Magi kneeling before the Christ child, we get below the killing of the children ordered by Herod—that is, the complementary crude event, very undignified. Other borders show animals, contemporary games, and much that is hard to interpret. Art historians are familiar with these marvelous pictures in manuscripts that are religious, and naturally ask whether theological or symbolic significance should be presumed. These manuscripts are Gothic, and it is commonly said that this kind of thing gets going in the mid-thirteenth century. It would seem that a good look at the Bayeux tapestry, facilitated by the impressive reproductions in this book, can enrich our understanding of these and many other puzzles, and do so in a very pleasurable way.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Richard Serra at MOMA *by Hilton Kramer*
François Boucher at the Met *by Dan Hofstadter*
Anton Chekhov *by Joseph Epstein*
The Mies centenary *by William H. Jordy*
Vikram Seth's "The Golden Gate" *by Bruce Bawer*
Schumann on the couch *by Robert Craft*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letters

The musician as writer

To the Editors:

Though I am not in the habit of writing letters to the editor, the article by Samuel Lipman, "But If the Artist Fail?," in the February issue provided ample grist.

Before I comment on the article, I would like to express my appreciation of the magazine itself. I may not always agree with what is said, but hats off to how you say it.

Emotionally I end up agreeing with the final judgments in most of your articles that deal with the arts. Such is the case with Mr. Lipman's. Would that audiences who attend concerts today had the capacity to recognize the importance of the last word in the last sentence of Mr. Lipman's article: "It would be a pity if the harsh interior reality artists face in their daily lives were forever to be ignored by those who, in reading about these artists, prefer enjoyment to understanding."

The wrath dissipated by the truth of that sentence had reached its height in me with Mr. Lipman's criticism of the musician as writer, i.e., the comments on Janet Baker's diary. I doubt whether anyone who did not appreciate Dame Janet's gift would really be interested in reading the book, except perhaps to be "in the know," but then "understanding" would be difficult to achieve: such a person would really be interested in her as a human being/artist rather than vice versa. Perhaps through a thorough reading someone might even glean an introduction to "understanding," which was her reason for writing in the first place (shared, no doubt, with monetary rewards).

In any case, I would suggest, since Mr. Lipman so magnanimously points out the weaknesses of Dame Janet's talent as a writer, that she be given an opportunity to respond. Mr. Lipman could prepare a vocal recital allowing her an opportunity to act the critic in her own territory. It would certainly provide a rather interesting article for the magazine.

William E. Lowry
Greenbelt, Maryland

Samuel Lipman replies:

I thank William E. Lowry for his kind comments about *The New Criterion* and about my article. My strictures concerning Janet Baker's diary were not directed toward her achievement as a singer, but toward the book she has written. The only purpose to be gained by such a book—other than the satisfaction of her many fans and the monetary rewards to which Mr. Lowry refers—is a heightened understanding of art and the life of the artist. In Dame Janet's case, such understanding was rendered impossible by the sentimental tone and predictable content of what she chose to write. As for Mr. Lowry's final point, everyone who knows me is quite happy that I am not a singer. I have, however, been a pianist for most of my life. The concerts I have given have been open to, and have been covered by, the press—more than once, to my distress. I have written books; these too have properly been subject to critical commentary. Dame Janet, in making her diaries

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

available to the reading public, has written a book. This book is open, as all books must be, to both praise and censure. In this particular case, Dame Janet and I are in just about the same boat.

I want to thank John Joseph, the author of the second letter on Philip Larkin printed below, for pointing out my error in transforming Charles Strickland, Maugham's protagonist in *The Moon and Sixpence,* into Charles Stackpole. Strickland and Mr. Joseph are right; Stackpole and I are wrong.

Reading Larkin

To the Editors:
In his appreciation of Philip Larkin ("Trying to Preserve Something," *The New Criterion,* February 1986), Robert Richman cites Seamus Heaney's 1982 essay on Larkin for the proposition that Larkin's poetic career reflects a struggle between Yeats's visionary interests and Hardy's more skeptical qualities. Just to fill out the record: Andrew Motion's study of Larkin—noted by Mr. Richman in his January 1986 review of Motion's *Dangerous Play: Poems 1974-1984*—makes a similar argument, tracing the tension between provincialism and symbolism, restraint and emotion, throughout Larkin's work. Motion's book was also published in 1982.

Although Heaney, according to Mr. Richman, believes that the phrases "O wolves of memory! Immensements!" from "Sad Steps" represent the "symbolic transports" associated with Yeats, the context in which these phrases appear actually demonstrates an attempt to rein in standard hyperbolic descriptions of the moon:

> Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!
> O wolves of memory! Immensements! No,
>
> One shivers slightly, looking up there.
> The hardness and the brightness and the plain
> Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare
>
> Is a reminder of the strength and pain
> Of being young . . . .

Thus, "Sad Steps" strengthens the common argument of Messrs. Heaney, Motion, and Richman, rather than representing just the Yeatsian side of Larkin's coin.

Conrad Bahlke
Washington, D.C.

To the Editors:
In the February 1986 issue of *The New Criterion,* Robert Richman offers a brief and, I think, inaccurate reading of Philip Larkin's poem "Days." Whereas Mr. Richman finds the poem "ambiguous" and self-conflicting, it seems to me that the poem makes a rather simple, easily paraphrased statement.

I agree with Mr. Richman that the first stanza posits a "here-and-now empiricism," but I do not think that Larkin "spurns" this view of life. Mr. Richman apparently sees the second stanza as containing a valid challenge or counterweight to the empiricism of the first stanza. I see the second stanza as satirical in tone: "the priest and the doctor/In their long coats" are what Larkin spurns—that is, those who would set themselves up as shamans telling others what life means as opposed to the humble, empiricist, skeptical attitude that it doesn't mean anything, that it's just a series of days that we should make the most of. I think that Mr. Richman fails to catch the negative tone of Larkin's image of the priest and doctor who pretend to "solve" the question of life's purpose.

John Joseph
Cleveland, Ohio

To the Editors:
I congratulate *The New Criterion* for looking after Philip Larkin in your February issue. Although his volumes were slim, they will not be easily forgotten. Nor, as your contributors suggest, should they be.

A few points should be made, however, in regard to Robert Richman's essay. X. J. Kennedy, in his essay in the February issue, pointed out that "Larkin is a dangerous critic to meet in a dark alley." Mr. Richman, in my view, makes the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mistake of testing this idea. Mr. Richman seems to be in search of "hopeful transcendent impulses" in Larkin's work. He somehow feels that Larkin's poetic impulse evolved into a "sheer fear of death." Does Mr. Richman have any evidence (as Hardy demanded from his countless critics) of hopeful transcendent impulses that could be suggested to Larkin? Does he have some good news to relieve the pain and suffering that Larkin felt all around him? Can he offer to him anything other than the current popular systems of metaphysics that Hardy, Housman, and Larkin rejected?

Larkin wrote about what he saw around him. As he says of his "Grandfather" Hardy, "He wrote of men and the lives of men, time and the passing of time." If this view offered a great deal of gloom and darkness, on the other hand it also offered, as Mr. Richman correctly points out, a great deal of love (loving kindness, Hardy would say). Is there something Larkin misses? Should Larkin look to his gleaming temple in the mirror and draw a picture of a bushy-haired man?

Mr. Richman's comments on Hardy are simply not true. Hardy did not "invent an obsession" for a dead wife out of a fear of death. This notion that Hardy created a "forgetful illusion" is all wrong. Hardy's greatness lies, in part, in his not "harboring" any illusions. He remained consistent in his beliefs for more than sixty years. These "obsessions" of Hardy were his *Poems of 1912-13*, an obsession that Irving Howe has called, as a group, perhaps "the greatest personal elegies in the English language." Hardy's poems of this period were a result of grief and guilt and had nothing to do with a fear of death. Hardy's neglect of his wife Emma, especially during her last years and illness (Robert Gittings has labeled his inaction a virtual "crime") and the great guilt associated with this period of indifference to her resulted in these fine poems. Mr. Richman would do well to read Hardy's correspondence during the last fifteen years of his life or to review the many letters and observations of visitors to Max Gate for any shred of evidence that Hardy was "worried" about his own death. No one was more at home plodding around a cemetery than Thomas Hardy. He is, in fact, resting comfortably in two of them.

LOUIS K. MEISEL
141 prince street ny

CHARLES BELL

NATHAN
SLATE JOSEPH

April 5 - 26. 1986

Work by all
Photorealists

and

A continuing & expanding
commitment to

Abstract Painting

LOUIS K. MEISEL
141 prince street ny

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the year Philip Larkin was born, 1922, Hardy published the poem "An Ancient to Ancients." Larkin knew these lines well and learned from them. There is no "fear" here, but hope. The last stanza leaves off:

> And ye, red-lipped and smooth-browed;
> list,
> Gentlemen;
> Much is there waits you we have missed;
> Much lore we leave you worth the knowing,
> Much, much has lain outside our ken:
> Nay, rush not: time serves: we are going,
> Gentlemen.

Peter Lennon
Chicago, Illinois

Robert Richman replies:

I should like to thank Conrad Bahlke for mentioning Andrew Motion's fine book. I would also like to call the interested reader's attention to Barbara Everett's essay, "Philip Larkin: After Symbolism," which appeared in *Essays in Criticism* (July, 1980). However, I do not share Mr. Bahlke's contention that the line, "O wolves of memory! Immensements!" represents one of (presumably) many "standard hyperbolic descriptions" of the moon, a description which the following lines in the poem "rein in." I agree with Seamus Heaney, who believes the line in question offers the speaker of the poem the temptation of a "dream of fullness, this time in the symbolist transports of the language itself." What Mr. Bahlke belittles as a "standard hyperbolic" description is in Heaney's view (and mine) a "sensation of revelation" (another phrase of Heaney's used elsewhere in the same essay) that is not in the least bit ordinary.

I couldn't disagree more with John Joseph's interpretation of "Days." I have always been startled by the last two lines of the poem precisely because they *do not* confirm the empirical attitude elaborated in the first stanza. Larkin's image of disembodied men running across a field seems to me to transport the reader into a realm quite beyond the declamatory, discursive world of the first stanza—indeed, beyond speech and literal content altogether. My own feeling is that if Larkin wished a plain and simple criticism of priests and doctors he would have dismissed them by means of satire or mimicry. That he chose not to speaks volumes about his overall intention in these lines.

Peter Lennon is a dangerous reader to meet in a dark alley, at least insofar as Philip Larkin's poetry is concerned. He is too literal-minded. As I pointed out in my article, there are many "hopeless" views expressed in Larkin's poetry and prose. But there is far more to the poetry than this. I submit that the "metaphysics" of both Hardy and Larkin—two writers who in Mr. Lennon's view spurned "the current popular systems of metaphysics"—is poetry. For poetry offers an illusion of transcendence no matter how bleak the statement. As Larkin himself said, "A poem about failure is a success."

But Larkin abandoned the "illusion" of poetry in his final years. Hardy, on the other hand, did not. And the fuel that kept this illusion going for Hardy was the memory of his dead wife. Hardy invoked what Lennon calls "the great guilt associated with this period of indifference" precisely in order to attempt to "spurn" the reality of encroaching death. Larkin, however, couldn't maintain his belief in the transcendent impulse of poetry as he got older, and thus fell into silence.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kikuo Saito

New Paintings

Modernist Selections

April 2 to 26

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc.

22 East 80 Street New York, NY 10021 Tel: (212) 879-6606

Gallery hours: Monday-Saturday, 10 to 5:30

Barbara Cushing

Landscape Paintings

March 29-April 23, 1986

Robert Schoelkopf Gallery

50 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

APRIL 1986

Steven Sorman

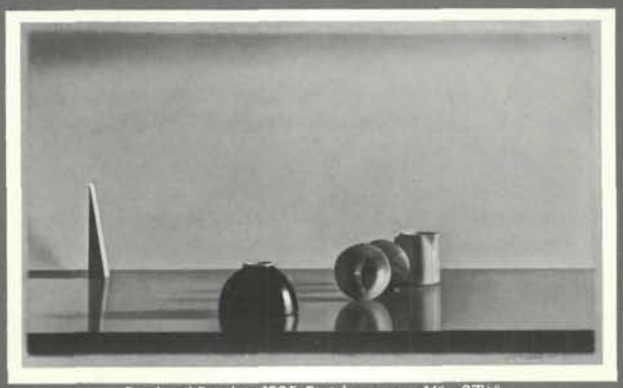
Major New Work on Paper and Drapery Sheer

Dolan/Maxwell Gallery

1701 WALNUT STREET, PHILADELPHIA 19103, TEL. 215.665.1701

TATISTCHEFF

APRIL 5-MAY 3



Bowl and Peaches, 1985, Pastel on paper, 16" x 27½"

G. DANIEL MASSAD

PASTELS/First New York Exhibition

50 WEST 57 STREET NEW YORK 10019 212 664 0907

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

KRAUSHAAR GALLERIES
FOUNDED 1885

JOHN
HELIKER

PAINTINGS
April 2-26

724 FIFTH AVENUE • NEW YORK, N.Y. 10019 • (212) 307-5730

CLEVE GRAY
APRIL 10 - MAY 7

LEE HALL
MAY 10 - JUNE 4

SELECTED ARTISTS ALSO REPRESENTED

BENNY ANDREWS
BETTY PARSONS (ESTATE)
ELYSSA RUNDEL
PAUL FEELEY (ESTATE)
S.W. HAYTER
LEATRICE ROSE
DANIEL B. SCHWARTZ

ARMSTRONG GALLERY 50 W. 57 NYC 10019

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOHN HULTBERG

RECENT PAINTINGS

April 10 - May 10

ARBITRAGE GALLERY
99 SPRING STREET / NYC 10012
212-334-9755

March 18 - May 4

PORTLAND MUSEUM OF ART
PORTLAND, MAINE
04101

Arbitrage Gallery will change its name to Anita Shapolsky Gallery.

NELL BLAINE SKETCHBOOK

A limited edition of a recent sketchbook
with facsimile pages in color and black and white

Preface by John Ashbery

The edition is limited to 726 copies. All are numbered and signed by the artist.
One hundred copies contain an original etching.
Seventy-four pages, 18 in 6 colors and 25 drawings, measuring 11 5/8 x 9 1/4" clothbound.
Printed in Verona, Italy, at the Stamperia Valdonega.

The sketchbook will be available at the Nell Blaine exhibition
of prints in the Mezzanine Gallery, April 8—May 8.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The Mezzanine Gallery

for information call 879-5500, ext. 2910

Published by The Arts Publisher, Inc., New York

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

383 West Broadway, SoHo, NY 10012 (212) 925-5100

DiLAURENTI GALLERY

Alberto

BURRI

March 13-April 26

18 PAINTINGS 1953-1986

Catalogue $10 postage paid

IN CHICAGO

American ART FORUM

WITH

RICHARD LOVE

THE NATION'S TALK SHOW ON ART

Every Saturday night at 10:30, NOTED ART HISTORIAN, Richard Love focuses on traditions, celebrities, rising trends, ideas, makers and shakers in today's art world. Always informative, sometimes controversial, Love's guests are from every part of the art world, museums, critics, artists, scholars, collectors and experts of every sort. Guests have included Kenneth Noland, Roderic Blackburn, Peter Hassrick, Don Mason, Robert Bishop, Hilton Kramer, Rosina Florio, Clement Greenberg, Ed Paschke, Morrison Heckscher, Richard Hunt, Michael Danoff, Ill. Governor James Thompson, Anita Gold, and many more. Remember, you may not always agree, but you'll like what you see on American Art Forum, every Saturday nite at 10:30 on Chicago's TV 26 and Milwaukee's TV 55.

WEEKLY

SATURDAY NIGHTS 10:30

WCIU-TV 26

MILWAUKEE–TV 55

Richard Love with Robert Bishop, Director of the Museum of American Folk Art, New York City and Anita Gold, syndicated Antiques columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Patrick Henry Bruce

(1881-1936)

Flowers, c. mid-1911. *Oil on canvas, 21¼ × 25½ inches.*

WASHBURN

42 E 57 & 113 Greene, New York (212) 753-0546

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 503
New York NY 10019

Second Class Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

D...RRSALBRR01ZA 06/30/86
ARTHUR J MORRISLAW
LIBRARY
UNIV OF VIRGINIA
CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA 22901

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED